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NEW ARABIAN NIGHTS

BY

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON



IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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THE PAVILION ON THE LINKS.

INSCRIBED TO

D. A. S.

IN MEMORY OF DAYS NEAR FIDRA.

VOL. II.

B

THE PAVILION ON THE LINKS.

CHAPTER I.

TELLS HOW I CAMPED IN GRADEN SEA-WOOD, AND
BEHELD A LIGHT IN THE PAVILION.

I WAS a great solitary when I was young. I made it my pride to keep aloof and suffice for my own entertainment ; and I may say that I had neither friends nor acquaintances until I met that friend who became my wife and the mother of my children. With one man only was I on private terms ; this was R. Northmour, Esquire, of Graden Easter, in Scotland. We had met at college ; and though there was not much liking between us, nor even much intimacy, we were so nearly of a humour that we could associate with ease to both. Misanthropes, we believed ourselves to be ; but I have thought since that we were only sulky fellows. It was scarcely a companionship, but a coexistence in unsociability. Northmour's exceptional violence of

temper made it no easy affair for him to keep the peace with anyone but me ; and as he respected my silent ways, and let me come and go as I pleased, I could tolerate his presence without concern. I think we called each other friends.

When Northmour took his degree and I decided to leave the university without one, he invited me on a long visit to Graden Easter ; and it was thus that I first became acquainted with the scene of my adventures. The mansion house of Graden stood in a bleak stretch of country some three miles from the shore of the German Ocean. It was as large as a barrack ; and as it had been built of a soft stone, liable to consume in the eager air of the seaside, it was damp and draughty within and half ruinous without. It was impossible for two young men to lodge with comfort in such a dwelling. But there stood in the northern part of the estate, in a wilderness of links and blowing sand-hills, and between a plantation and the sea, a small Pavilion or Belvidere, of modern design, which was exactly suited to our wants ; and in this hermitage, speaking little, reading much, and rarely associating except at meals, Northmour and I spent four tempestuous winter months. I might have stayed longer ; but one March night there sprang up between us a dispute,

which rendered my departure necessary. Northmour spoke hotly, I remember, and I suppose I must have made some tart rejoinder. He leaped from his chair and grappled me; I had to fight, without exaggeration, for my life; and it was only with a great effort that I mastered him, for he was near as strong in body as myself, and seemed filled with the devil. The next morning, we met on our usual terms; but I judged it more delicate to withdraw; nor did he attempt to dissuade me.

It was nine years before I revisited the neighbourhood. I travelled at that time with a tilt cart, a tent, and a cooking-stove, tramping all day beside the waggon, and at night, whenever it was possible, gipsying in a cove of the hills, or by the side of a wood. I believe I visited in this manner most of the wild and desolate regions both in England and Scotland; and, as I had neither friends nor relations, I was troubled with no correspondence, and had nothing in the nature of head-quarters, unless it was the office of my solicitors, from whom I drew my income twice a year. It was a life in which I delighted; and I fully thought to have grown old upon the march, and at last died in a ditch.

It was my whole business to find desolate corners, where I could camp without the fear of

interruption; and hence, being in another part of the same shire, I bethought me suddenly of the Pavilion on the Links. No thoroughfare passed within three miles of it. The nearest town, and that was but a fisher village, was at a distance of six or seven. For ten miles of length, and from a depth varying from three miles to half a mile, this belt of barren country lay along the sea. The beach, which was the natural approach, was full of quicksands. Indeed I may say there is hardly a better place of concealment in the United Kingdom. I determined to pass a week in the Sea-Wood of Graden-Easter, and making a long stage, reached it about sundown on a wild September day.

The country, I have said, was mixed sand-hill and links; *links* being a Scottish name for sand which has ceased drifting and become more or less solidly covered with turf. The pavilion stood on an even space; a little behind it, the wood began in a hedge of elders huddled together by the wind; in front, a few tumbled sand-hills stood between it and the sea. An outcropping of rock had formed a bastion for the sand, so that there was here a promontory in the coast-line between two shallow bays; and just beyond the tides, the rock again cropped

out and formed an islet of small dimensions but strikingly designed. The quicksands were of great extent at low water, and had an infamous reputation in the country. Close in shore, between the islet and the promontory, it was said they would swallow a man in four minutes and a half; but there may have been little ground for this precision. The district was alive with rabbits, and haunted by gulls which made a continual piping about the pavilion. On summer days the outlook was bright and even gladsome; but at sundown in September, with a high wind, and a heavy surf rolling in close along the links, the place told of nothing but dead mariners and sea disaster. A ship beating to windward on the horizon, and a huge truncheon of wreck half buried in the sands at my feet, completed the innuendo of the scene.

The pavilion—it had been built by the last proprietor, Northmour's uncle, a silly and prodigal virtuoso—presented little signs of age. It was two stories in height, Italian in design, surrounded by a patch of garden in which nothing had prospered but a few coarse flowers; and looked, with its shuttered windows, not like a house that had been deserted, but like one that had never been tenanted by man. Northmour was plainly from home; whether, as

usual, sulking in the cabin of his yacht, or in one of his fitful and extravagant appearances in the world of society, I had, of course, no means of guessing. The place had an air of solitude that daunted even a solitary like myself; the wind cried in the chimneys with a strange and wailing note; and it was with a sense of escape, as if I were going indoors, that I turned away and, driving my cart before me, entered the skirts of the wood.

The Sea-Wood of Graden had been planted to shelter the cultivated fields behind, and check the encroachments of the blowing sand. As you advanced into it from coastward, elders were succeeded by other hardy shrubs; but the timber was all stunted and bushy; it led a life of conflict; the trees were accustomed to swing there all night long in fierce winter tempests; and even in early spring, the leaves were already flying, and autumn was beginning, in this exposed plantation. Inland the ground rose into a little hill, which, along with the islet, served as a sailing mark for seamen. When the hill was open of the islet to the north, vessels must bear well to the eastward to clear Graden Ness and the Graden Bulls. In the lower ground, a streamlet ran among the trees, and, being dammed with dead leaves and clay of its own carrying, spread

out every here and there, and lay in stagnant pools. One or two ruined cottages were dotted about the wood ; and, according to Northmour, these were ecclesiastical foundations, and in their time had sheltered pious hermits.

I found a den, or small hollow, where there was a spring of pure water ; and there, clearing away the brambles, I pitched the tent, and made a fire to cook my supper. My horse I picketed farther in the wood where there was a patch of sward. The banks of the den not only concealed the light of my fire, but sheltered me from the wind, which was cold as well as high.

The life I was leading made me both hardy and frugal. I never drank but water, and rarely ate anything more costly than oatmeal ; and I required so little sleep, that, although I rose with the peep of day, I would often lie long awake in the dark or starry watches of the night. Thus in Graden Sea-Wood, although I fell thankfully asleep by eight in the evening I was awake again before eleven with a full possession of my faculties, and no sense of drowsiness or fatigue. I rose and sat by the fire, watching the trees and clouds tumultuously tossing and fleeing overhead, and hearkening to the wind and the rollers along the shore ; till at length, growing

weary of inaction, I quitted the den, and strolled towards the borders of the wood. A young moon, buried in mist, gave a faint illumination to my steps; and the light grew brighter as I walked forth into the links. At the same moment, the wind, smelling salt of the open ocean and carrying particles of sand, struck me with its full force, so that I had to bow my head.

When I raised it again to look about me, I was aware of a light in the pavilion. It was not stationary; but passed from one window to another, as though some one were reviewing the different apartments with a lamp or candle. I watched it for some seconds in great surprise. When I had arrived in the afternoon the house had been plainly deserted; now it was as plainly occupied. It was my first idea that a gang of thieves might have broken in and be now ransacking Northmour's cupboards, which were many and not ill supplied. But what should bring thieves to Graden Easter? And, again, all the shutters had been thrown open, and it would have been more in the character of such gentry to close them. I dismissed the notion, and fell back upon another. Northmour himself must have arrived, and was now airing and inspecting the pavilion.

I have said that there was no real affection between this man and me ; but, had I loved him like a brother, I was then so much more in love with solitude that I should none the less have shunned his company. As it was, I turned and ran for it ; and it was with genuine satisfaction that I found myself safely back beside the fire. I had escaped an acquaintance ; I should have one more night in comfort. In the morning, I might either slip away before Northmour was abroad, or pay him as short a visit as I chose.

But when morning came, I thought the situation so diverting that I forgot my shyness. Northmour was at my mercy ; I arranged a good practical jest, though I knew well that my neighbour was not the man to jest with in security ; and, chuckling beforehand over its success, took my place among the elders at the edge of the wood, whence I could command the door of the pavilion. The shutters were all once more closed, which I remember thinking odd ; and the house, with its white walls and green venetians, looked spruce and habitable in the morning light. Hour after hour passed, and still no sign of Northmour. I knew him for a sluggard in the morning ; but, as it drew on towards noon, I lost my patience. To say the truth, I had promised

myself to break my fast in the pavilion, and hunger began to prick me sharply. It was a pity to let the opportunity go by without some cause for mirth; but the grosser appetite prevailed, and I relinquished my jest with regret, and sallied from the wood.

The appearance of the house affected me, as I drew near, with disquietude. It seemed unchanged since last evening; and I had expected it, I scarce knew why, to wear some external signs of habitation. But no: the windows were all closely shuttered, the chimneys breathed no smoke, and the front door itself was closely padlocked. Northmour, therefore, had entered by the back; this was the natural, and indeed, the necessary conclusion; and you may judge of my surprise when, on turning the house, I found the back door similarly secured.

My mind at once reverted to the original theory of thieves; and I blamed myself sharply for my last night's inaction. I examined all the windows on the lower story, but none of them had been tampered with; I tried the padlocks, but they were both secure. It thus became a problem how the thieves, if thieves they were, had managed to enter the house. They must have got, I reasoned, upon the roof of the outhouse where Northmour used to keep his photographic battery; and from thence, either

by the window of the study or that of my old bedroom, completed their burglarious entry.

I followed what I supposed was their example; and, getting on the roof, tried the shutters of each room. Both were secure; but I was not to be beaten; and, with a little force, one of them flew open, grazing, as it did so, the back of my hand. I remember, I put the wound to my mouth, and stood for perhaps half a minute licking it like a dog, and mechanically gazing behind me over the waste links and the sea; and, in that space of time, my eye made note of a large schooner yacht some miles to the north-east. Then I threw up the window and climbed in.

I went over the house, and nothing can express my mystification. There was no sign of disorder, but, on the contrary, the rooms were unusually clean and pleasant. I found fires laid, ready for lighting; three bedrooms prepared with a luxury quite foreign to Northmour's habits, and with water in the ewers and the beds turned down; a table set for three in the dining-room; and an ample supply of cold meats, game, and vegetables on the pantry shelves. There were guests expected, that was plain; but why guests, when Northmour hated society? And, above all, why was the house thus stealthily prepared at

dead of night ? and why were the shutters closed and the doors padlocked ?

I effaced all traces of my visit, and came forth from the window feeling sobered and concerned.

The schooner yacht was still in the same place ; and it flashed for a moment through my mind that this might be the *Red Earl* bringing the owner of the pavilion and his guests. But the vessel's head was set the other way.

CHAPTER II.

TELLS OF THE NOCTURNAL LANDING FROM THE YACHT.

I RETURNED to the den to cook myself a meal, of which I stood in great need, as well as to care for my horse, whom I had somewhat neglected in the morning. From time to time I went down to the edge of the wood; but there was no change in the pavilion, and not a human creature was seen all day upon the links. The schooner in the offing was the one touch of life within my range of vision. She, apparently with no set object, stood off and on or lay to, hour after hour; but as the evening deepened, she drew steadily nearer. I became more convinced that she carried Northmour and his friends, and that they would probably come ashore after dark; not only because that was of a piece with the secrecy of the preparations, but because the tide would not have flowed sufficiently before eleven to cover Graden Floe and the other sea quags that fortified the shore against invaders.

All day the wind had been going down, and the sea along with it; but there was a return towards sunset of the heavy weather of the day before. The night set in pitch dark. The wind came off the sea in squalls, like the firing of a battery of cannon; now and then there was a flaw of rain, and the surf rolled heavier with the rising tide. I was down at my observatory among the elders, when a light was run up to the masthead of the schooner, and showed she was closer in than when I had last seen her by the dying daylight. I concluded that this must be a signal to Northmour's associates on shore; and, stepping forth into the links, looked around me for something in response.

A small footpath ran along the margin of the wood, and formed the most direct communication between the pavilion and the mansion-house; and, as I cast my eyes to that side, I saw a spark of light, not a quarter of a mile away, and rapidly approaching. From its uneven course it appeared to be the light of a lantern carried by a person who followed the windings of the path, and was often staggered and taken aback by the more violent squalls. I concealed myself once more among the elders, and waited eagerly for the new comer's advance. It proved to be a woman; and, as she passed within

half a rod of my ambush, I was able to recognise the features. The deaf and silent old dame, who had nursed Northmour in his childhood, was his associate in this underhand affair.

I followed her at a little distance, taking advantage of the innumerable heights and hollows, concealed by the darkness, and favoured not only by the nurse's deafness, but by the uproar of the wind and surf. She entered the pavilion, and, going at once to the upper story, opened and set a light in one of the windows that looked towards the sea. Immediately afterwards the light at the schooner's masthead was run down and extinguished. Its purpose had been attained, and those on board were sure that they were expected. The old woman resumed her preparations; although the other shutters remained closed, I could see a glimmer going to and fro about the house; and a gush of sparks from one chimney after another soon told me that the fires were being kindled.

Northmour and his guests, I was now persuaded, would come ashore as soon there was water on the floe. It was a wild night for boat service; and I felt some alarm mingle with my curiosity as I reflected on the danger of the landing. My old acquaintance, it was true, was the most eccentric of

men; but the present eccentricity was both disquieting and lugubrious to consider. A variety of feelings thus led me towards the beach, where I lay flat on my face in a hollow within six feet of the track that led to the pavilion. Thence, I should have the satisfaction of recognising the arrivals, and, if they should prove to be acquaintances, greeting them as soon as they had landed.

Some time before eleven, while the tide was still dangerously low, a boat's lantern appeared close in shore; and, my attention being thus awakened, I could perceive another still far to seaward, violently tossed, and sometimes hidden by the billows. The weather, which was getting dirtier as the night went on, and the perilous situation of the yacht upon lee-shore, had probably driven them to attempt a landing at the earliest possible moment.

A little afterwards, four yachtsmen carrying a very heavy chest, and guided by a fifth with a lantern, passed close in front of me as I lay, and were admitted to the pavilion by the nurse. They returned to the beach, and passed me a third time with another chest, larger but apparently not so heavy as the first. A third time they made the transit; and on this occasion one of the yachtsmen carried a leather portmanteau, and the others a

lady's trunk and carriage bag. My curiosity was sharply excited. If a woman were among the guests of Northmour, it would show a change in his habits and an apostasy from his pet theories of life, well calculated to fill me with surprise. When he and I dwelt there together, the pavilion had been a temple of misogyny. And now, one of the detested sex was to be installed under its roof. I remembered one or two particulars, a few notes of daintiness and almost of coquetry which had struck me the day before as I surveyed the preparations in the house; their purpose was now clear, and I thought myself dull not to have perceived it from the first.

While I was thus reflecting, a second lantern drew near me from the beach. It was carried by a yachtsman whom I had not yet seen, and who was conducting two other persons to the pavilion. These two persons were unquestionably the guests for whom the house was made ready; and, straining eye and ear, I set myself to watch them as they passed. One was an unusually tall man, in a travelling hat slouched over his eyes, and a highland cape closely buttoned and turned up so as to conceal his face. You could make out no more of him than that he was, as I have said, unusually tall, and walked feebly with a heavy stoop. By his side, and either cling-

ing to him or giving him support—I could not make out which—was a young, tall, and slender figure of a woman. She was extremely pale; but in the light of the lantern her face was so marred by strong and changing shadows, that she might equally well have been as ugly as sin or as beautiful as I afterwards found her to be.

When they were just abreast of me, the girl made some remark which was drowned by the noise of the wind.

‘Hush!’ said her companion; and there was something in the tone with which the word was uttered that thrilled and rather shook my spirits. It seemed to breathe from a bosom labouring under the deadliest terror; I have never heard another syllable so expressive; and I still hear it again when I am feverish at night, and my mind runs upon old times. The man turned towards the girl as he spoke; I had a glimpse of much red beard and a nose which seemed to have been broken in youth; and his light eyes seemed shining in his face with some strong and unpleasant emotion.

But these two passed on and were admitted in their turn to the pavilion.

One by one, or in groups, the seamen returned

to the beach. The wind brought me the sound of a rough voice crying, 'Shove off!' Then, after a pause, another lantern drew near. It was Northmour alone.

My wife and I, a man and a woman, have often agreed to wonder how a person could be, at the same time, so handsome and so repulsive as Northmour. He had the appearance of a finished gentleman; his face bore every mark of intelligence and courage; but you had only to look at him, even in his most amiable moment, to see that he had the temper of a slaver captain. I never knew a character that was both explosive and revengeful to the same degree; he combined the vivacity of the south with the sustained and deadly hatreds of the north; and both traits were plainly written on his face, which was a sort of danger signal. In person, he was tall, strong, and active; his hair and complexion very dark; his features handsomely designed, but spoiled by a menacing expression.

At that moment he was somewhat paler than by nature; he wore a heavy frown; and his lips worked, and he looked sharply round him as he walked, like a man besieged with apprehensions. And yet I thought he had a look of triumph underlying all, as though he had already done much, and was near the end of an achievement.

Partly from a scruple of delicacy—which I dare say came too late—partly from the pleasure of startling an acquaintance, I desired to make my presence known to him without delay.

I got suddenly to my feet, and stepped forward.

‘Northmour!’ said I.

I have never had so shocking a surprise in all my days. He leaped on me without a word; something shone in his hand; and he struck for my heart with a dagger. At the same moment I knocked him head over heels. Whether it was my quickness, or his own uncertainty, I know not; but the blade only grazed my shoulder, while the hilt and his fist struck me violently on the mouth.

I fled, but not far. I had often and often observed the capabilities of the sand-hills for protracted ambush or stealthy advances and retreats; and, not ten yards from the scene of the scuffle, plumped down again upon the grass. The lantern had fallen and gone out. But what was my astonishment to see Northmour slip at a bound into the pavilion, and hear him bar the door behind him with a clang of iron!

He had not pursued me. He had run away. Northmour, whom I knew for the most implacable and daring of men, had run away! I could scarce believe my reason; and yet in this strange business,

where all was incredible, there was nothing to make a work about in an incredibility more or less. For why was the pavilion secretly prepared? Why had Northmour landed with his guests at dead of night, in half a gale of wind, and with the floe scarce covered? Why had he sought to kill me? Had he not recognised my voice? I wondered. And, above all, how had he come to have a dagger ready in his hand? A dagger, or even a sharp knife, seemed out of keeping with the age in which we lived; and a gentleman landing from his yacht on the shore of his own estate, even although it was at night and with some mysterious circumstances, does not usually, as a matter of fact, walk thus prepared for deadly onslaught. The more I reflected, the further I felt at sea. I recapitulated the elements of mystery, counting them on my fingers: the pavilion secretly prepared for guests; the guests landed at the risk of their lives and to the imminent peril of the yacht; the guests, or at least one of them, in undisguised and seemingly causeless terror; Northmour with a naked weapon; Northmour stabbing his most intimate acquaintance at a word; last, and not least strange, Northmour fleeing from the man whom he had sought to murder, and barricading himself, like a hunted creature, behind the door of the pavilion.

Here were at least six separate causes for extreme surprise; each part and parcel with the others, and forming all together one consistent story. I felt almost ashamed to believe my own senses.

As I thus stood, transfixed with wonder, I began to grow painfully conscious of the injuries I had received in the scuffle; skulked round among the sand-hills; and, by a devious path, regained the shelter of the wood. On the way, the old nurse passed again within several yards of me, still carrying her lantern, on the return journey to the mansion-house of Graden. This made a seventh suspicious feature in the case. Northmour and his guests, it appeared, were to cook and do the cleaning for themselves, while the old woman continued to inhabit the big empty barrack among the policies. There must surely be great cause for secrecy, when so many inconveniences were confronted to preserve it.

So thinking, I made my way to the den. For greater security, I trod out the embers of the fire, and lit my lantern to examine the wound upon my shoulder. It was a trifling hurt, although it bled somewhat freely, and I dressed it as well as I could (for its position made it difficult to reach) with some rag and cold water from the spring. While I was thus busied, I mentally declared war against North-

mour and his mystery. I am not an angry man by nature, and I believe there was more curiosity than resentment in my heart. But war I certainly declared; and, by way of preparation, I got out my revolver, and, having drawn the charges, cleaned and reloaded it with scrupulous care. Next I became preoccupied about my horse. It might break loose, or fall to neighing, and so betray my camp in the Sea-Wood. I determined to rid myself of its neighbourhood; and long before dawn I was leading it over the links in the direction of the fisher village.

CHAPTER III.

TELLS HOW I BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH MY WIFE.

FOR two days I skulked round the pavilion, profiting by the uneven surface of the links. I became an adept in the necessary tactics. These low hillocks and shallow dells, running one into another, became a kind of cloak of darkness for my enthralling, but perhaps dishonourable, pursuit. Yet, in spite of this advantage, I could learn but little of Northmour or his guests.

Fresh provisions were brought under cover of darkness by the old woman from the mansion-house. Northmour, and the young lady, sometimes together, but more often singly, would walk for an hour or two at a time on the beach beside the quicksand. I could not but conclude that this promenade was chosen with an eye to secrecy; for the spot was open only to the seaward. But it suited me not less excellently; the highest and most accidented of the sand-hills immediately adjoined; and from these,

lying flat in a hollow, I could overlook Northmour or the young lady as they walked.

The tall man seemed to have disappeared. Not only did he never cross the threshold, but he never so much as showed face at a window; or, at least, not so far as I could see; for I dared not creep forward beyond a certain distance in the day, since the upper floor commanded the bottoms of the links; and at night, when I could venture farther, the lower windows were barricaded as if to stand a siege. Sometimes I thought the tall man must be confined to bed, for I remembered the feebleness of his gait; and sometimes I thought he must have gone clear away, and that Northmour and the young lady remained alone together in the pavilion. The idea, even then, displeased me.

Whether or not this pair were man and wife, I had seen abundant reason to doubt the friendliness of their relation. Although I could hear nothing of what they said, and rarely so much as glean a decided expression on the face of either, there was a distance, almost a stiffness, in their bearing which showed them to be either unfamiliar or at enmity. The girl walked faster when she was with Northmour than when she was alone; and I conceived that any inclination between a man and a woman would rather

delay than accelerate the step. Moreover, she kept a good yard free of him, and trailed her umbrella, as if it were a barrier, on the side between them. Northmour kept sidling closer; and, as the girl retired from his advance, their course lay at a sort of diagonal across the beach, and would have landed them in the surf had it been long enough continued. But, when this was imminent, the girl would unostentatiously change sides and put Northmour between her and the sea. I watched these manœuvres, for my part, with high enjoyment and approval, and chuckled to myself at every move.

On the morning of the third day, she walked alone for some time, and I perceived, to my great concern, that she was more than once in tears. You will see that my heart was already interested more than I supposed. She had a firm yet airy motion of the body, and carried her head with unimaginable grace; every step was a thing to look at, and she seemed in my eyes to breathe sweetness and distinction.

The day was so agreeable, being calm and sunshiny, with a tranquil sea, and yet with a healthful piquancy and vigour in the air, that, contrary to custom, she was tempted forth a second time to walk. On this occasion she was accompanied by Northmour,

and they had been but a short while on the beach, when I saw him take forcible possession of her hand. She struggled, and uttered a cry that was almost a scream. I sprang to my feet, unmindful of my strange position ; but, ere I had taken a step, I saw Northmour bare-headed and bowing very low, as if to apologise ; and dropped again at once into my ambush. A few words were interchanged ; and then, with another bow, he left the beach to return to the pavilion. He passed not far from me, and I could see him, flushed and lowering, and cutting savagely with his cane among the grass. It was not without satisfaction that I recognised my own handiwork in a great cut under his right eye, and a considerable discolouration round the socket.

For some time the girl remained where he had left her, looking out past the islet and over the bright sea. Then with a start, as one who throws off preoccupation and puts energy again upon its mettle, she broke into a rapid and decisive walk. She also was much incensed by what had passed. She had forgotten where she was. And I beheld her walk straight into the borders of the quicksand where it is most abrupt and dangerous. Two or three steps farther and her life would have been in serious jeopardy, when I slid down the face of the sand-hill,

which is there precipitous, and, running half-way forward, called to her to stop.

She did so, and turned round. There was not a tremor of fear in her behaviour, and she marched directly up to me like a queen. I was barefoot, and clad like a common sailor, save for an Egyptian scarf round my waist; and she probably took me at first for some one from the fisher village, straying after bait. As for her, when I thus saw her face to face, her eyes set steadily and imperiously upon mine, I was filled with admiration and astonishment, and thought her even more beautiful than I had looked to find her. Nor could I think enough of one who, acting with so much boldness, yet preserved a maidenly air that was both quaint and engaging; for my wife kept an old-fashioned precision of manner through all her admirable life—an excellent thing in woman, since it sets another value on her sweet familiarities.

‘What does this mean?’ she asked.

‘You were walking,’ I told her, ‘directly into Graden Floe.’

‘You do not belong to these parts,’ she said again.

‘You speak like an educated man.’

‘I believe I have right to that name,’ said I, ‘although in this disguise.’

But her woman's eye had already detected the sash.

'Oh!' she said; 'your sash betrays you.'

'You have said the word *betray*,' I resumed. 'May I ask you not to betray me? I was obliged to disclose myself in your interest; but if Northmour learned my presence it might be worse than disagreeable for me.'

'Do you know,' she asked, 'to whom you are speaking?'

'Not to Mr. Northmour's wife?' I asked, by way of answer.

She shook her head. All this while she was studying my face with an embarrassing intentness. Then she broke out—

'You have an honest face. Be honest like your face, sir, and tell me what you want and what you are afraid of. Do you think I could hurt you? I believe you have far more power to injure me! And yet you do not look unkind. What do you mean—you, a gentleman—by skulking like a spy about this desolate place? Tell me,' she said, 'who is it you hate?'

'I hate no one,' I answered; 'and I fear no one face to face. My name is Cassilis—Frank Cassilis. I lead the life of a vagabond for my own good

pleasure. I am one of Northmour's oldest friends; and three nights ago, when I addressed him on these links, he stabbed me in the shoulder with a knife.'

'It was you!' she said.

'Why he did so,' I continued, disregarding the interruption, 'is more than I can guess, and more than I care to know. I have not many friends, nor am I very susceptible to friendship; but no man shall drive me from a place by terror. I had camped in Graden Sea-Wood ere he came; I camp in it still. If you think I mean harm to you or yours, madam, the remedy is in your hand. Tell him that my camp is in the Hemlock Den, and to-night he can stab me in safety while I sleep.'

With this I doffed my cap to her, and scrambled up once more among the sand-hills. I do not know why, but I felt a prodigious sense of injustice, and felt like a hero and a martyr; while, as a matter of fact, I had not a word to say in my defence, nor so much as one plausible reason to offer for my conduct. I had stayed at Graden out of a curiosity natural enough, but undignified; and though there was another motive growing in along with the first, it was not one which, at that period, I could have properly explained to the lady of my heart.

Certainly, that night, I thought of no one else;

and, though her whole conduct and position seemed suspicious, I could not find it in my heart to entertain a doubt of her integrity. I could have staked my life that she was clear of blame, and, though all was dark at the present, that the explanation of the mystery would show her part in these events to be both right and needful. It was true, let me cudgel my imagination as I pleased, that I could invent no theory of her relations to Northmour; but I felt none the less sure of my conclusion because it was founded on instinct in place of reason, and, as I may say, went to sleep that night with the thought of her under my pillow.

Next day she came out about the same hour alone, and, as soon as the sand-hills concealed her from the pavilion, drew nearer to the edge, and called me by name in guarded tones. I was astonished to observe that she was deadly pale, and seemingly under the influence of strong emotion.

‘Mr. Cassilis!’ she cried; ‘Mr. Cassilis!’

I appeared at once, and leaped down upon the beach. A remarkable air of relief overspread her countenance as soon as she saw me

‘Oh!’ she cried, with a hoarse sound, like one whose bosom has been lightened of a weight. And

then, 'Thank God you are still safe!' she added; 'I knew, if you were, you would be here.' (Was not this strange? So swiftly and wisely does Nature prepare our hearts for these great life-long intimacies, that both my wife and I had been given a presentiment on this the second day of our acquaintance. I had even then hoped that she would seek me; she had felt sure that she would find me.) 'Do not,' she went on swiftly, 'do not stay in this place. Promise me that you will sleep no longer in that wood. You do not know how I suffer; all last night I could not sleep for thinking of your peril.'

'Peril?' I repeated. 'Peril from whom? From Northmour?'

'Not so,' she said. 'Did you think I would tell him after what you said?'

'Not from Northmour?' I repeated. 'Then how? From whom? I see none to be afraid of.'

'You must not ask me,' was her reply, 'for I am not free to tell you. Only believe me, and go hence—believe me, and go away quickly, quickly, for your life!'

An appeal to his alarm is never a good plan to rid oneself of a spirited young man. My obstinacy was but increased by what she said, and I made

it a point of honour to remain. And her solicitude for my safety still more confirmed me in the resolve.

‘You must not think me inquisitive, madam,’ I replied; ‘but, if Graden is so dangerous a place, you yourself perhaps remain here at some risk.’

She only looked at me reproachfully.

‘You and your father——’ I resumed; but she interrupted me almost with a gasp.

‘My father! How do you know that?’ she cried.

‘I saw you together when you landed,’ was my answer; and I do not know why, but it seemed satisfactory to both of us, as indeed it was the truth. ‘But,’ I continued, ‘you need have no fear from me. I see you have some reason to be secret, and, you may believe me, your secret is as safe with me as if I were in Graden Floe. I have scarce spoken to anyone for years; my horse is my only companion, and even he, poor beast, is not beside me. You see, then, you may count on me for silence. So tell me the truth, my dear young lady, are you not in danger?’

‘Mr. Northmour says you are an honourable man,’ she returned, ‘and I believe it when I see you. I will tell you so much; you are right; we

are in dreadful, dreadful danger, and you share it by remaining where you are.'

'Ah!' said I; 'you have heard of me from Northmour? And he gives me a good character?'

'I asked him about you last night,' was her reply. 'I pretended,' she hesitated, 'I pretended to have met you long ago, and spoken to you of him. It was not true; but I could not help myself without betraying you, and you had put me in a difficulty. He praised you highly.'

'And—you may permit me one question—does this danger come from Northmour?' I asked.

'From Mr. Northmour?' she cried. 'Oh, no; he stays with us to share it.'

'While you propose that I should run away?' I said. 'You do not rate me very high.'

'Why should you stay?' she asked. 'You are no friend of ours.'

I know not what came over me, for I had not been conscious of a similar weakness since I was a child, but I was so mortified by this retort that my eyes pricked and filled with tears, as I continued to gaze upon her face.

'No, no,' she said, in a changed voice; 'I did not mean the words unkindly.'

'It was I who offended,' I said; and I held out

my hand with a look of appeal that somehow touched her, for she gave me hers at once, and even eagerly. I held it for awhile in mine, and gazed into her eyes. It was she who first tore her hand away, and, forgetting all about her request and the promise she had sought to extort, ran at the top of her speed, and without turning, till she was out of sight. And then I knew that I loved her, and thought in my glad heart that she—she herself—was not indifferent to my suit. Many a time she has denied it in after days, but it was with a smiling and not a serious denial. For my part, I am sure our hands would not have lain so closely in each other if she had not begun to melt to me already. And, when all is said, it is no great contention, since, by her own avowal, she began to love me on the morrow.

And yet on the morrow very little took place. She came and called me down as on the day before, upbraided me for lingering at Graden, and, when she found I was still obdurate, began to ask me more particularly as to my arrival. I told her by what series of accidents I had come to witness their disembarkation, and how I had determined to remain, partly from the interest which had been awakened in me by Northmour's guests, and partly

because of his own murderous attack. As to the former, I fear I was disingenuous, and led her to regard herself as having been an attraction to me from the first moment that I saw her on the links. It relieves my heart to make this confession even now, when my wife is with God, and already knows all things, and the honesty of my purpose even in this; for while she lived, although it often pricked my conscience, I had never the hardihood to deceive her. Even a little secret, in such a married life as ours, is like the rose-leaf which kept the Princess from her sleep.

From this the talk branched into other subjects, and I told her much about my lonely and wandering existence; she, for her part, giving ear, and saying little. Although we spoke very naturally, and latterly on topics that might seem indifferent, we were both sweetly agitated. Too soon it was time for her to go; and we separated, as if by mutual consent, without shaking hands, for both knew that, between us, it was no idle ceremony.

The next, and that was the fourth day of our acquaintance, we met in the same spot, but early in the morning, with much familiarity and yet much timidity on either side. When she had once more spoken about my danger—and that, I understood,

was her excuse for coming—I, who had prepared a great deal of talk during the night, began to tell her how highly I valued her kind interest, and how no one had ever cared to hear about my life, nor had I ever cared to relate it, before yesterday. Suddenly she interrupted me, saying with vehemence—

‘And yet, if you knew who I was, you would not so much as speak to me!’

I told her such a thought was madness, and, little as we had met, I counted her already a dear friend; but my protestations seemed only to make her more desperate.

‘My father is in hiding!’ she cried.

‘My dear,’ I said, forgetting for the first time to add ‘young lady,’ ‘what do I care? If he were in hiding twenty times over, would it make one thought of change in you?’

‘Ah, but the cause!’ she cried, ‘the cause! It is——’ she faltered for a second—‘it is disgraceful to us!’

CHAPTER IV.

TELLS IN WHAT A STARTLING MANNER I LEARNED THAT
I WAS NOT ALONE IN GRADEN SEA-WOOD.

THIS was my wife's story, as I drew it from her among tears and sobs. Her name was Clara Huddleston: it sounded very beautiful in my ears; but not so beautiful as that other name of Clara Cassilis, which she wore during the longer and, I thank God, the happier portion of her life. Her father, Bernard Huddleston, had been a private banker in a very large way of business. Many years before, his affairs becoming disordered, he had been led to try dangerous, and at last criminal, expedients to retrieve himself from ruin. All was in vain; he became more and more cruelly involved, and found his honour lost at the same moment with his fortune. About this period, Northmour had been courting his daughter with great assiduity, though with small encouragement; and to him, knowing him thus disposed in his favour, Bernard Huddleston turned

for help in his extremity. It was not merely ruin and dishonour, nor merely a legal condemnation, that the unhappy man had brought upon his head. It seems he could have gone to prison with a light heart. What he feared, what kept him awake at night or recalled him from slumber into frenzy, was some secret, sudden, and unlawful attempt upon his life. Hence, he desired to bury his existence and escape to one of the islands in the South Pacific, and it was in Northmour's yacht, the *Red Earl*, that he designed to go. The yacht picked them up clandestinely upon the coast of Wales, and had once more deposited them at Graden, till she could be refitted and provisioned for the longer voyage. Nor could Clara doubt that her hand had been stipulated as the price of passage. For, although Northmour was neither unkind nor even discourteous, he had shown himself in several instances somewhat overbold in speech and manner.

I listened, I need not say, with fixed attention, and put many questions as to the more mysterious part. It was in vain. She had no clear idea of what the blow was, nor of how it was expected to fall. Her father's alarm was unfeigned and physically prostrating, and he had thought more than once of making an unconditional surrender to the

police. But the scheme was finally abandoned, for he was convinced that not even the strength of our English prisons could shelter him from his pursuers. He had had many affairs with Italy, and with Italians resident in London, in the later years of his business; and these last, as Clara fancied, were somehow connected with the doom that threatened him. He had shown great terror at the presence of an Italian seaman on board the *Red Earl*, and had bitterly and repeatedly accused Northmour in consequence. The latter had protested that Beppo (that was the seaman's name) was a capital fellow, and could be trusted to the death; but Mr. Huddlestone had continued ever since to declare that all was lost, that it was only a question of days, and that Beppo would be the ruin of him yet.

I regarded the whole story as the hallucination of a mind shaken by calamity. He had suffered heavy loss by his Italian transactions; and hence the sight of an Italian was hateful to him, and the principal part in his nightmare would naturally enough be played by one of that nation.

‘What your father wants,’ I said, ‘is a good doctor and some calming medicine.’

‘But Mr. Northmour?’ objected your mother.

‘He is untroubled by losses, and yet he shares in this terror.’

I could not help laughing at what I considered her simplicity.

‘My dear,’ said I, ‘you have told me yourself what reward he has to look for. All is fair in love, you must remember; and if Northmour fomenta your father’s terrors, it is not at all because he is afraid of any Italian man, but simply because he is infatuated with a charming English woman.’

She reminded me of his attack upon myself on the night of the disembarkation, and this I was unable to explain. In short, and from one thing to another, it was agreed between us, that I should set out at once for the fisher village, Graden Wester, as it was called, look up all the newspapers I could find, and see for myself if there seemed any basis of fact for these continued alarms. The next morning, at the same hour and place, I was to make my report to Clara. She said no more on that occasion about my departure; nor, indeed, did she make it a secret that she clung to the thought of my proximity as something helpful and pleasant; and, for my part, I could not have left her, if she had gone upon her knees to ask it.

I reached Graden Wester before ten in the fore-

noon; for in those days I was an excellent pedestrian, and the distance, as I think I have said, was little over seven miles; fine walking all the way upon the springy turf. The village is one of the bleakest on that coast, which is saying much: there is a church in a hollow; a miserable haven in the rocks, where many boats have been lost as they returned from fishing; two or three score of stone houses arranged along the beach and in two streets, one leading from the harbour, and another striking out from it at right angles; and, at the corner of these two, a very dark and cheerless tavern, by way of principal hotel.

I had dressed myself somewhat more suitably to my station in life, and at once called upon the minister in his little manse beside the graveyard. He knew me, although it was more than nine years since we had met; and when I told him that I had been long upon a walking tour, and was behind with the news, readily lent me an armful of newspapers, dating from a month back to the day before. With these I sought the tavern, and, ordering some breakfast, sat down to study the 'Huddleston Failure.'

It had been, it appeared, a very flagrant case. Thousands of persons were reduced to poverty; and one in particular had blown out his brains as soon as

payment was suspended. It was strange to myself that, while I read these details, I continued rather to sympathise with Mr. Huddlestone than with his victims; so complete already was the empire of my love for my wife. A price was naturally set upon the banker's head; and, as the case was inexcusable and the public indignation thoroughly aroused, the unusual figure of 750*l.* was offered for his capture. He was reported to have large sums of money in his possession. One day, he had been heard of in Spain; the next, there was sure intelligence that he was still lurking between Manchester and Liverpool, or along the border of Wales; and the day after, a telegram would announce his arrival in Cuba or Yucatan. But in all this there was no word of an Italian, nor any sign of mystery.

In the very last paper, however, there was one item not so clear. The accountants who were charged to verify the failure had, it seemed, come upon the traces of a very large number of thousands, which figured for some time in the transactions of the house of Huddlestone; but which came from nowhere, and disappeared in the same mysterious fashion. It was only once referred to by name, and then under the initials 'X. X.'; but it had plainly been floated for the first time into the business at a

period of great depression some six years ago. The name of a distinguished Royal personage had been mentioned by rumour in connection with this sum. 'The cowardly desperado'—such, I remember, was the editorial expression—was supposed to have escaped with a large part of this mysterious fund still in his possession.

I was still brooding over the fact, and trying to torture it into some connection with Mr. Huddleston's danger, when a man entered the tavern and asked for some bread and cheese with a decided foreign accent.

'*Siete Italiano?*' said I.

'*Sì signor,*' was his reply.

I said it was unusually far north to find one of his compatriots; at which he shrugged his shoulders, and replied that a man would go anywhere to find work. What work he could hope to find at Graden Wester, I was totally unable to conceive; and the incident struck so unpleasantly upon my mind, that I asked the landlord, while he was counting me some change, whether he had ever before seen an Italian in the village. He said he had once seen some Norwegians, who had been shipwrecked on the other side of Graden Ness and rescued by the lifeboat from Cauld-haven.

‘No!’ said I; ‘but an Italian, like the man who has just had bread and cheese.’

‘What?’ cried he, ‘yon black-avised fellow wi’ the teeth? Was he an I-talian? Weel, yon’s the first that ever I saw, an’ I dare say he’s like to be the last.’

Even as he was speaking, I raised my eyes, and, casting a glance into the street, beheld three men in earnest conversation together, and not thirty yards away. One of them was my recent companion in the tavern parlour; the other two, by their handsome, sallow features and soft hats, should evidently belong to the same race. A crowd of village children stood around them, gesticulating and talking gibberish in imitation. The trio looked singularly foreign to the bleak dirty street in which they were standing, and the dark grey heaven that overspread them; and I confess my incredulity received at that moment a shock from which it never recovered. I might reason with myself as I pleased, but I could not argue down the effect of what I had seen, and I began to share in the Italian terror.

It was already drawing towards the close of the day before I had returned the newspapers at the manse, and got well forward on to the links on my way home. I shall never forget that walk. It grew

very cold and boisterous; the wind sang in the short grass about my feet; thin rain showers came running on the gusts; and an immense mountain range of clouds began to arise out of the bosom of the sea. It would be hard to imagine a more dismal evening; and whether it was from these external influences, or because my nerves were already affected by what I had heard and seen, my thoughts were as gloomy as the weather.

The upper windows of the pavilion commanded a considerable spread of links in the direction of Graden Wester. To avoid observation, it was necessary to hug the beach until I had gained cover from the higher sand-hills on the little headland, when I might strike across, through the hollows, for the margin of the wood. The sun was about setting; the tide was low, and all the quicksands uncovered; and I was moving along, lost in unpleasant thought, when I was suddenly thunderstruck to perceive the prints of human feet. They ran parallel to my own course, but low down upon the beach instead of along the border of the turf; and, when I examined them, I saw at once, by the size and coarseness of the impression, that it was a stranger to me and to those in the pavilion who had recently passed that way. Not only so; but from the recklessness of the course

which he had followed, steering near to the most formidable portions of the sand, he was as evidently a stranger to the country and to the ill-repute of Graden beach.

Step by step I followed the prints; until, a quarter of a mile farther, I beheld them die away into the south-eastern boundary of Graden Floe. There, whoever he was, the miserable man had perished. One or two gulls, who had, perhaps, seen him disappear, wheeled over his sepulchre with their usual melancholy piping. The sun had broken through the clouds by a last effort, and coloured the wide level of quicksands with a dusky purple. I stood for some time gazing at the spot, - chilled and disheartened by my own reflections, and with a strong and commanding consciousness of death. I remember wondering how long the tragedy had taken, and whether his screams had been audible at the pavilion. And then, making a strong resolution, I was about to tear myself away, when a gust fiercer than usual fell upon this quarter of the beach, and I saw now, whirling high in air, now skimming lightly across the surface of the sands, a soft, black, felt hat, somewhat conical in shape, such as I had remarked already on the heads of the Italians.

I believe, but I am not sure, that I uttered a

cry. The wind was driving the hat shoreward, and I ran round the border of the floe to be ready against its arrival. The gust fell, dropping the hat for a while upon the quicksand, and then, once more freshening, landed it a few yards from where I stood. I seized it with the interest you may imagine. It had seen some service; indeed, it was rustier than either of those I had seen that day upon the street. The lining was red, stamped with the name of the maker, which I have forgotten, and that of the place of manufacture, *Venedig*. This (it is not yet forgotten) was the name given by the Austrians to the beautiful city of Venice, then, and for long after, a part of their dominions.

The shock was complete. I saw imaginary Italians upon every side; and for the first, and, I may say, for the last time in my experience, became overpowered by what is called a panic terror. I knew nothing, that is, to be afraid of, and yet I admit that I was heartily afraid; and it was with a sensible reluctance that I returned to my exposed and solitary camp in the Sea-Wood.

There I ate some cold porridge which had been left over from the night before, for I was disinclined to make a fire; and, feeling strengthened and reassured, dismissed all these fanciful terrors

from my mind, and lay down to sleep with composure.

How long I may have slept it is impossible for me to guess; but I was awakened at last by a sudden, blinding flash of light into my face. It woke me like a blow. In an instant I was upon my knees. But the light had gone as suddenly as it came. The darkness was intense. And, as it was blowing great guns from the sea and pouring with rain, the noises of the storm effectually concealed all others.

It was, I dare say, half a minute before I regained my self-possession. But for two circumstances, I should have thought I had been awakened by some new and vivid form of nightmare. First, the flap of my tent, which I had shut carefully when I retired, was now unfastened; and, second, I could still perceive, with a sharpness that excluded any theory of hallucination, the smell of hot metal and of burning oil. The conclusion was obvious. I had been wakened by someone flashing a bull's-eye lantern in my face. It had been but a flash, and away. He had seen my face, and then gone. I asked myself the object of so strange a proceeding, and the answer came pat. The man, whoever he was, had thought to recognise me, and he had not. There was yet another question unresolved; and to this, I may say,

I feared to give an answer ; if he had recognised me, what would he have done ?

My fears were immediately diverted from myself, for I saw that I had been visited in a mistake ; and I became persuaded that some dreadful danger threatened the pavilion. It required some nerve to issue forth into the black and intricate thicket which surrounded and overhung the den ; but I groped my way to the links, drenched with rain, beaten upon and deafened by the gusts, and fearing at every step to lay my hand upon some lurking adversary. The darkness was so complete that I might have been surrounded by an army and yet none the wiser, and the uproar of the gale so loud that my hearing was as useless as my sight.

For the rest of that night, which seemed interminably long, I patrolled the vicinity of the pavilion, without seeing a living creature or hearing any noise but the concert of the wind, the sea, and the rain. A light in the upper story filtered through a cranny of the shutter, and kept me company till the approach of dawn.

CHAPTER V.

TELLS OF AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN NORTHMOUR, CLARA, AND MYSELF.

WITH the first peep of day, I retired from the open to my old lair among the sandhills, there to await the coming of my wife. The morning was grey, wild, and melancholy; the wind moderated before sunrise, and then went about, and blew in puffs from the shore; the sea began to go down, but the rain still fell without mercy. Over all the wilderness of links there was not a creature to be seen. Yet I felt sure the neighbourhood was alive with skulking foes. The light had been so suddenly and surprisingly flashed upon my face as I lay sleeping, and the hat that had been blown ashore by the wind from over Graden Floe, were two speaking signals of the peril that environed Clara and the party in the pavilion.

It was, perhaps, half-past seven, or nearer eight,

before I saw the door open, and that dear figure come towards me in the rain. I was waiting for her on the beach before she had crossed the sand-hills.

‘I have had such trouble to come!’ she cried. ‘They did not wish me to go walking in the rain.’

‘Clara,’ I said, ‘you are not frightened!’

‘No,’ said she, with a simplicity that filled my heart with confidence. For my wife was the bravest as well as the best of women; in my experience, I have not found the two go always together, but with her they did; and she combined the extreme of fortitude with the most endearing and beautiful virtues.

I told her what had happened; and, though her cheek grew visibly paler, she retained perfect control over her senses.

‘You see now that I am safe,’ said I, in conclusion. ‘They do not mean to harm me; for, had they chosen, I was a dead man last night.’

She laid her hand upon my arm.

‘And I had no presentiment!’ she cried.

Her accent thrilled me with delight. I put my arm about her, and strained her to my side; and, before either of us was aware, her hands were on my shoulders and my lips upon her mouth. Yet up to that moment no word of love had passed

between us. To this day I remember the touch of her cheek, which was wet and cold with the rain; and many a time since, when she has been washing her face, I have kissed it again for the sake of that morning on the beach. Now that she is taken from me, and I finish my pilgrimage alone, I recall our old lovingkindnesses and the deep honesty and affection which united us, and my present loss seems but a trifle in comparison.

We may have thus stood for some seconds—for time passes quickly with lovers—before we were startled by a peal of laughter close at hand. It was not natural mirth, but seemed to be affected in order to conceal an angrier feeling. We both turned, though I still kept my left arm about Clara's waist; nor did she seek to withdraw herself; and there, a few paces off upon the beach, stood Northmour, his head lowered, his hands behind his back, his nostrils white with passion.

'Ah! Cassilis!' he said, as I disclosed my face.

'That same,' said I; for I was not at all put about.

'And so, Miss Huddlestone,' he continued slowly but savagely, 'this is how you keep your faith to your father and to me? This is the value you set upon your father's life? And you are so infatuated

with this young gentleman that you must brave ruin, and decency, and common human caution——’

‘Miss Huddlestone——’ I was beginning to interrupt him, when he, in his turn, cut in brutally—

‘You hold your tongue,’ said he; ‘I am speaking to that girl.’

‘That girl, as you call her, is my wife,’ said I; and my wife only leaned a little nearer, so that I knew she had affirmed my words.

‘Your what?’ he cried. ‘You lie!’

‘Northmour,’ I said, ‘we all know you have a bad temper, and I am the last man to be irritated by words. For all that, I propose that you speak lower, for I am convinced that we are not alone.’

He looked round him, and it was plain my remark had in some degree sobered his passion. ‘What do you mean!’ he asked.

I only said one word: ‘Italians.’

He swore a round oath, and looked at us, from one to the other.

‘Mr. Cassilis knows all that I know,’ said my wife.

‘What I want to know,’ he broke out, ‘is where the devil Mr. Cassilis comes from, and what the devil Mr. Cassilis is doing here. You say you are married; that I do not believe. If you were,

Graden Floe would soon divorce you; four minutes and a half, Cassilis. I keep my private cemetery for my friends.'

'It took somewhat longer,' said I, 'for that Italian.'

He looked at me for a moment half daunted, and then, almost civilly, asked me to tell my story. 'You have too much the advantage of me, Cassilis,' he added. I complied of course; and he listened, with several ejaculations, while I told him how I had come to Graden: that it was I whom he had tried to murder on the night of landing; and what I had subsequently seen and heard of the Italians.

'Well,' said he, when I had done, 'it is here at last; there is no mistake about that. And what, may I ask, do you propose to do?'

'I propose to stay with you and lend a hand,' said I.

'You are a brave man,' he returned, with a peculiar intonation.

'I am not afraid,' said I.

'And so,' he continued, 'I am to understand that you two are married? And you stand up to it before my face, Miss Huddlestone?'

'We are not yet married,' said Clara; 'but we shall be as soon as we can.'

‘Bravo!’ cried Northmour. ‘And the bargain? D—n it, you’re not a fool, young woman; I may call a spade a spade with you. How about the bargain? You know as well as I do what your father’s life depends upon. I have only to put my hands under my coat-tails and walk away, and his throat would be cut before the evening.’

‘Yes, Mr. Northmour,’ returned Clara, with great spirit; ‘but that is what you will never do. You made a bargain that was unworthy of a gentleman; but you are gentleman for all that, and you will never desert a man whom you have begun to help.’

‘Aha!’ said he. ‘You think I will give my yacht for nothing? You think I will risk my life and liberty for love of the old gentleman; and then, I suppose, be best man at the wedding, to wind up? Well,’ he added, with an odd smile, ‘perhaps you are not altogether wrong. But ask Cassilis here. *He* knows me. Am I a man to trust? Am I safe and scrupulous? Am I kind?’

‘I know you talk a great deal, and sometimes, I think, very foolishly,’ replied Clara, ‘but I know you are a gentleman, and I am not the least afraid.’

He looked at her with a peculiar approval and

admiration; then, turning to me, 'Do you think I would give her up without a struggle, Frank?' said he. 'I tell you plainly, you look out. The next time we come to blows——'

'Will make the third,' I interrupted, smiling.

'Aye, true; so it will,' he said. 'I had forgotten. Well, the third time's lucky.'

'The third time, you mean, you will have the crew of the *Red Earl* to help,' I said.

'Do you hear him?' he asked, turning to my wife.

'I hear two men speaking like cowards,' said she. 'I should despise myself either to think or speak like that. And neither of you believe one word that you are saying, which makes it the more wicked and silly.'

'She's a trump!' cried Northmour. 'But she's not yet Mrs. Cassilis. I say no more. The present is not for me.'

Then my wife surprised me.

'I leave you here,' she said suddenly. 'My father has been too long alone. But remember this: you are to be friends, for you are both good friends to me.'

She has since told me her reason for this step. As long as she remained, she declares that we two

would have continued to quarrel; and I suppose that she was right, for when she was gone we fell at once into a sort of confidentiality.

Northmour stared after her as she went away over the sand-hill.

‘She is the only woman in the world!’ he exclaimed with an oath. ‘Look at her action.’

I, for my part, leaped at this opportunity for a little further light.

‘See here, Northmour,’ said I; ‘we are all in a tight place, are we not?’

‘I believe you, my boy,’ he answered, looking me in the eyes, and with great emphasis. ‘We have all hell upon us, that’s the truth. You may believe me or not, but I’m afraid of my life.’

‘Tell me one thing,’ said I. ‘What are they after, these Italians? What do they want with Mr. Huddleston?’

‘Don’t you know?’ he cried. ‘The black old scamp had *carbonaro* funds on a deposit—two hundred and eighty thousand; and of course he gambled it away on stocks. There was to have been a revolution in the Tridentino, or Parma; but the revolution is off, and the whole wasp’s nest is after Huddleston. We shall all be lucky if we can save our skins.’

‘The *carbonari*!’ I exclaimed; ‘God help him indeed!’

‘Amen!’ said Northmour. ‘And now, look here: I have said that we are in a fix; and, frankly, I shall be glad of your help. If I can’t save Huddestone, I want at least to save the girl. Come and stay in the pavilion; and, there’s my hand on it, I shall act as your friend until the old man is either clear or dead. But,’ he added, ‘once that is settled, you become my rival once again, and I warn you—mind yourself.’

‘Done!’ said I; and we shook hands.

‘And now let us go directly to the fort,’ said Northmour; and he began to lead the way through the rain.

CHAPTER VI.

TELLS OF MY INTRODUCTION TO THE TALL MAN.

WE were admitted to the pavilion by Clara, and I was surprised by the completeness and security of the defences. A barricade of great strength, and yet easy to displace, supported the door against any violence from without; and the shutters of the dining-room, into which I was led directly, and which was feebly illuminated by a lamp, were even more elaborately fortified. The panels were strengthened by bars and cross-bars; and these, in their turn, were kept in position by a system of braces and struts, some abutting on the floor, some on the roof, and others, in fine, against the opposite wall of the apartment. It was at once a solid and well-designed piece of carpentry; and I did not seek to conceal my admiration.

‘I am the engineer,’ said Northmour. ‘You remember the planks in the garden? Behold them?’

‘I did not know you had so many talents,’ said I.

‘Are you armed?’ he continued, pointing to an array of guns and pistols, all in admirable order, which stood in line against the wall or were displayed upon the sideboard.

‘Thank you,’ I returned; ‘I have gone armed since our last encounter. But, to tell you the truth, I have had nothing to eat since early yesterday evening.’

Northmour produced some cold meat, to which I eagerly set myself, and a bottle of good Burgundy, by which, wet as I was, I did not scruple to profit. I have always been an extreme temperance man on principle; but it is useless to push principle to excess, and on this occasion I believe that I finished three-quarters of the bottle. As I ate, I still continued to admire the preparations for defence.

‘We could stand a siege,’ I said at length.

‘Ye—es,’ drawled Northmour; ‘a very little one, per—haps. It is not so much the strength of the pavilion I misdoubt; it is the double danger that kills me. If we get to shooting, wild as the country is some one is sure to hear it, and then—why then it’s the same thing, only different, as they say: caged by law, or killed by *carbonari*. There’s the choice. It is a devilish bad thing to have the

law against you in this world, and so I tell the old gentleman upstairs. He is quite of my way of thinking.'

'Speaking of that,' said I, 'what kind of person is he?'

'Oh, he!' cried the other; 'he's a rancid fellow, as far as he goes. I should like to have his neck wrung to-morrow by all the devils in Italy. I am not in this affair for him. You take me? I made a bargain for Missey's hand, and I mean to have it too.'

'That, by the way,' said I. 'I understand. But how will Mr. Huddleston take my intrusion?'

'Leave that to Clara,' returned Northmour.

I could have struck him in the face for this coarse familiarity; but I respected the truce, as, I am bound to say, did Northmour, and so long as the danger continued not a cloud arose in our relation. I bear him this testimony with the most unfeigned satisfaction; nor am I without pride when I look back upon my own behaviour. For surely no two men were ever left in a position so invidious and irritating.

As soon as I had done eating, we proceeded to inspect the lower floor. Window by window we tried the different supports, now and then

making an inconsiderable change ; and the strokes of the hammer sounded with startling loudness through the house. I proposed, I remember, to make loopholes ; but he told me they were already made in the windows of the upper story. It was an anxious business this inspection, and left me down-hearted. There were two doors and five windows to protect, and, counting Clara, only four of us to defend them against an unknown number of foes. I communicated my doubts to Northmour, who assured me, with unmoved composure, that he entirely shared them.

‘Before morning,’ said he, ‘we shall all be butchered and buried in Graden Floe. For me, that is written.’

I could not help shuddering at the mention of the quicksand, but reminded Northmour that our enemies had spared me in the wood.

‘Do not flatter yourself,’ said he. ‘Then you were not in the same boat with the old gentleman ; now you are. It’s the floe for all of us, mark my words.’

I trembled for Clara ; and just then her dear voice was heard calling us to come upstairs. Northmour showed me the way, and, when he had reached the landing, knocked at the door of what used to be

called *My Uncle's Bedroom*, as the founder of the pavilion had designed it especially for himself.

‘Come in, Northmour; come in, dear Mr. Casilis,’ said a voice from within.

Pushing open the door, Northmour admitted me before him into the apartment. As I came in I could see the daughter slipping out by the side door into the study, which had been prepared as her bedroom. In the bed, which was drawn back against the wall, instead of standing, as I had last seen it, boldly across the window, sat Bernard Huddleston, the defaulting banker. Little as I had seen of him by the shifting light of the lantern on the links, I had no difficulty in recognising him for the same. He had a long and sallow countenance, surrounded by a long red beard and side-whiskers. His broken nose and high cheekbones gave him somewhat the air of a Kalmuck, and his light eyes shone with the excitement of a high fever. He wore a skull-cap of black silk; a huge Bible lay open before him on the bed, with a pair of gold spectacles in the place, and a pile of other books lay on the stand by his side. The green curtains lent a cadaverous shade to his cheek; and, as he sat propped on pillows, his great stature was painfully hunched, and his head protruded till it overhung his knees. I believe if he had not died otherwise, he must have fallen a

victim to consumption in the course of but a very few weeks.

He held out to me a hand, long, thin, and disagreeably hairy.

‘Come in, come in, Mr. Cassilis,’ said he. ‘Another protector—ahem!—another protector. Always welcome as a friend of my daughter’s, Mr. Cassilis. How they have rallied about me, my daughter’s friends! May God in heaven bless and reward them for it!’

I gave him my hand, of course, because I could not help it; but the sympathy I had been prepared to feel for Clara’s father was immediately soured by his appearance, and the wheedling, unreal tones in which he spoke.

‘Cassilis is a good man,’ said Northmour; ‘worth ten.’

‘So I hear,’ cried Mr. Huddleston eagerly; ‘so my girl tells me. Ah, Mr. Cassilis, my sin has found me out, you see! I am very low, very low; but I hope equally penitent. We must all come to the throne of grace at last, Mr. Cassilis. For my part, I come late indeed; but with unfeigned humility, I trust.’

‘Fiddle-de-dee!’ said Northmour roughly.

‘No, no, dear Northmour!’ cried the banker.

‘You must not say that; you must not try to shake me. You forget, my dear, good boy, you forget I may be called this very night before my Maker.’

His excitement was pitiful to behold; and I felt myself grow indignant with Northmour, whose infidel opinions I well knew, and heartily derided, as he continued to taunt the poor sinner out of his humour of repentance.

‘Pooh, my dear Huddlestone!’ said he. ‘You do yourself injustice. You are a man of the world inside and out, and were up to all kinds of mischief before I was born. Your conscience is tanned like South American leather—only you forgot to tan your liver, and that, if you will believe me, is the seat of the annoyance.’

‘Rogue, rogue! bad boy!’ said Mr. Huddlestone, shaking his finger. ‘I am no precisian, if you come to that; I always hated a precisian; but I never lost hold of something better through it all. I have been a bad boy, Mr. Cassilis; I do not seek to deny that; but it was after my wife’s death, and you know, with a widower, it’s a different thing: sinful—I won’t say no; but there is a gradation, we shall hope. And talking of that—— Hark!’ he broke out suddenly, his hand raised, his fingers spread, his face racked with interest and terror. ‘Only the

rain, bless God!’ he added, after a pause, and with indescribable relief.

For some seconds he lay back among the pillows like a man near to fainting; then he gathered himself together, and, in somewhat tremulous tones, began once more to thank me for the share I was prepared to take in his defence.

‘One question, sir,’ said I, when he had paused. ‘Is it true that you have money with you?’

He seemed annoyed by the question, but admitted with reluctance that he had a little.

‘Well,’ I continued, ‘it is their money they are after, is it not? Why not give it up to them?’

‘Ah!’ replied he, shaking his head, ‘I have tried that already, Mr. Cassilis; and alas! that it should be so, but it is blood they want.’

‘Huddlestone, that’s a little less than fair,’ said Northmour. ‘You should mention that what you offered them was upwards of two hundred thousand short. The deficit is worth a reference; it is for what they call a cool sum, Frank. Then, you see, the fellows reason in their clear Italian way; and it seems to them, as indeed it seems to me, that they may just as well have both while they’re about it—money and blood together, by George, and no more trouble for the extra pleasure.’

‘Is it in the pavilion?’ I asked.

‘It is; and I wish it were in the bottom of the sea instead,’ said Northmour; and then suddenly—
‘What are you making faces at me for?’ he cried to Mr. Huddleston, on whom I had unconsciously turned my back. ‘Do you think Cassilis would sell you?’

Mr. Huddleston protested that nothing had been further from his mind.

‘It is a good thing,’ retorted Northmour in his ugliest manner. ‘You might end by wearying us. What were you going to say?’ he added, turning to me.

‘I was going to propose an occupation for the afternoon,’ said I. ‘Let us carry that money out, piece by piece, and lay it down before the pavilion door. If the *carbonari* come, why, it’s theirs at any rate.’

‘No, no,’ cried Mr. Huddleston; ‘it does not, it cannot belong to them! It should be distributed *pro rata* among all my creditors.’

‘Come now, Huddleston,’ said Northmour, ‘none of that.’

‘Well, but my daughter,’ moaned the wretched man.

‘Your daughter will do well enough. Here are

two suitors, Cassilis and I, neither of us beggars, between whom she has to choose. And as for yourself, to make an end of arguments, you have no right to a farthing, and, unless I'm much mistaken, you are going to die.'

It was certainly very cruelly said ; - but Mr. Huddleston was a man who attracted little sympathy ; and, although I saw him wince and shudder, I mentally endorsed the rebuke ; nay, I added a contribution of my own.

'Northmour and I,' I said, 'are willing enough to help you to save your life, but not to escape with stolen property.'

He struggled for a while with himself, as though he were on the point of giving way to anger, - but prudence had the best of the controversy.

'My dear boys,' he said, 'do with me or my money what you will. I leave all in your hands. Let me compose myself.'

And so we left him, gladly enough I am sure. The last that I saw, he had once more taken up his great Bible, and with tremulous hands was adjusting his spectacles to read. .

CHAPTER VII.

TELLS HOW A WORD WAS CRIED THROUGH THE
PAVILION WINDOW.

THE recollection of that afternoon will always be graven on my mind. Northmour and I were persuaded that an attack was imminent ; and if it had been in our power to alter in any way the order of events, that power would have been used to precipitate rather than delay the critical moment. The worst was to be anticipated ; yet we could conceive no extremity so miserable as the suspense we were now suffering. I have never been an eager, though always a great, reader ; but I never knew books so insipid as those which I took up and cast aside that afternoon in the pavilion. Even talk became impossible, as the hours went on. One or other was always listening for some sound, or peering from an upstairs window over the links. And yet not a sign indicated the presence of our foes.

We debated over and over again my proposal

with regard to the money; and had we been in complete possession of our faculties, I am sure we should have condemned it as unwise; but we were flustered with alarm, grasped at a straw, and determined, although it was as much as advertising Mr. Huddleston's presence in the pavilion, to carry my proposal into effect.

The sum was part in specie, part in bank paper, and part in circular notes payable to the name of James Gregory. We took it out, counted it, enclosed it once more in a despatch-box belonging to Northmour, and prepared a letter in Italian which he tied to the handle. It was signed by both of us under oath, and declared that this was all the money which had escaped the failure of the house of Huddleston. This was, perhaps, the maddest action ever perpetrated by two persons professing to be sane. Had the despatch-box fallen into other hands than those for which it was intended, we stood criminally convicted on our own written testimony; but, as I have said, we were neither of us in a condition to judge soberly, and had a thirst for action that drove us to do something, right or wrong, rather than endure the agony of waiting. Moreover, as we were both convinced that the hollows of the links were alive with hidden spies upon our movements, we hoped that our

appearance with the box might lead to a parley, and, perhaps, a compromise.

It was nearly three when we issued from the pavilion. The rain had taken off; the sun shone quite cheerfully. I have never seen the gulls fly so close about the house or approach so fearlessly to human beings. On the very doorstep one flapped heavily past our heads, and uttered its wild cry in my very ear.

‘There is an omen for you,’ said Northmour, who like all freethinkers was much under the influence of superstition. ‘They think we are already dead.’

I made some light rejoinder, but it was with half my heart; for the circumstance had impressed me.

A yard or two before the gate, on a patch of smooth turf, we set down the despatch-box; and Northmour waved a white handkerchief over his head. Nothing replied. We raised our voices, and cried aloud in Italian that we were there as ambassadors to arrange the quarrel; but the stillness remained unbroken save by the sea-gulls and the surf. I had a weight at my heart when we desisted; and I saw that even Northmour was unusually pale. He looked over his shoulder nervously, as though he feared that someone had crept between him and the pavilion door.

‘By God,’ he said in a whisper, ‘this is too much for me!’

I replied in the same key: ‘Suppose there should be none, after all!’

‘Look there,’ he returned, nodding with his head, as though he had been afraid to point.

I glanced in the direction indicated; and there, from the northern quarter of the Sea-Wood, beheld a thin column of smoke rising steadily against the now cloudless sky.

‘Northmour,’ I said (we still continued to talk in whispers), ‘it is not possible to endure this suspense. I prefer death fifty times over. Stay you here to watch the pavilion; I will go forward and make sure, if I have to walk right into their camp.’

He looked once again all round him with puckered eyes, and then nodded assentingly to my proposal.

My heart beat like a sledge-hammer as I set out walking rapidly in the direction of the smoke; and, though up to that moment I had felt chill and shivering, I was suddenly conscious of a glow of heat over all my body. The ground in this direction was very uneven; a hundred men might have lain hidden in as many square yards about my path. But I had not practised the business in vain, chose such routes

as cut at the very root of concealment, and, by keeping along the most convenient ridges, commanded several hollows at a time. It was not long before I was rewarded for my caution. Coming suddenly on to a mound somewhat more elevated than the surrounding hummocks, I saw, not thirty yards away, a man bent almost double, and running as fast as his attitude permitted, along the bottom of a gully. I had dislodged one of the spies from his ambush. As soon as I sighted him, I called loudly both in English and Italian; and he, seeing concealment was no longer possible, straightened himself out, leaped from the gully, and made off as straight as an arrow for the borders of the wood.

It was none of my business to pursue; I had learned what I wanted—that we were beleaguered and watched in the pavilion; and I returned at once, and walking as nearly as possible in my old footsteps, to where Northmour awaited me beside the despatch-box. He was even paler than when I had left him, and his voice shook a little.

‘Could you see what he was like?’ he asked.

‘He kept his back turned,’ I replied.

‘Let us get into the house, Frank. I don’t think I’m a coward, but I can stand no more of this,’ he whispered.

All was still and sunshiny about the pavilion, as we turned to re-enter it; even the gulls had flown in a wider circuit, and were seen flickering along the beach and sand-hills; and this loneliness terrified me more than a regiment under arms. It was not until the door was barricaded that I could draw a full inspiration and relieve the weight that lay upon my bosom. Northmour and I exchanged a steady glance; and I suppose each made his own reflections on the white and startled aspect of the other.

‘You were right,’ I said. ‘All is over. Shake hands, old man, for the last time.’

‘Yes,’ replied he, ‘I will shake hands; for, as sure as I am here, I bear no malice. But, remember, if, by some impossible accident, we should give the slip to these blackguards, I’ll take the upper hand of you by fair or foul.’

‘Oh,’ said I, ‘you weary me!’

He seemed hurt, and walked away in silence to the foot of the stairs, where he paused.

‘You do not understand,’ said he. ‘I am not a swindler, and I guard myself; that is all. It may weary you or not, Mr. Cassilis, I do not care a rush; I speak for my own satisfaction, and not for your amusement. You had better go upstairs and court the girl; for my part, I stay here.’

‘And I stay with you,’ I returned. ‘Do you think I would steal a march, even with your permission?’

‘Frank,’ he said, smiling, ‘it’s a pity you are an ass, for you have the makings of a man. I think I must be *fey* to-day; you cannot irritate me even when you try. Do you know,’ he continued softly, ‘I think we are the two most miserable men in England, you and I? we have got on to thirty without wife or child, or so much as a shop to look after—poor, pitiful, lost devils, both! And now we clash about a girl! As if there were not several millions in the United Kingdom! Ah, Frank, Frank, the one who loses this throw, be it you or me, he has my pity! It were better for him—how does the Bible say?—that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were cast into the depth of the sea. Let us take a drink,’ he concluded suddenly, but without any levity of tone.

I was touched by his words, and consented. He sat down on the table in the dining-room, and held up the glass of sherry to his eye.

‘If you beat me, Frank,’ he said, ‘I shall take to drink. What will you do, if it goes the other way?’

‘God knows,’ I returned.

‘Well,’ said he, ‘here is a toast in the meantime:
“*Italia irredenta!*”’

The remainder of the day was passed in the same dreadful tedium and suspense. I laid the table for dinner, while Northmour and Clara prepared the meal together in the kitchen. I could hear their talk as I went to and fro, and was surprised to find it ran all the time upon myself. Northmour again bracketed us together, and rallied Clara on a choice of husbands; but he continued to speak of me with some feeling, and uttered nothing to my prejudice unless he included himself in the condemnation. This awakened a sense of gratitude in my heart, which combined with the immediateness of our peril to fill my eyes with tears. After all, I thought—and perhaps the thought was laughably vain—we were here three very noble human beings to perish in defence of a thieving banker.

Before we sat down to table, I looked forth from an upstairs window. The day was beginning to decline; the links were utterly deserted; the despatch-box still lay untouched where we had left it hours before.

Mr. Huddleston, in a long yellow dressing-gown, took one end of the table, Clara the other; while Northmour and I faced each other from the sides. The lamp was brightly trimmed; the wine was good; the viands, although mostly cold, excellent of their

sort. We seemed to have agreed tacitly ; all reference to the impending catastrophe was carefully avoided ; and, considering our tragic circumstances, we made a merrier party than could have been expected. From time to time, it is true, Northmour or I would rise from table and make a round of the defences ; and, on each of these occasions, Mr. Huddlestone was recalled to a sense of his tragic predicament, glanced up with ghastly eyes, and bore for an instant on his countenance the stamp of terror. But he hastened to empty his glass, wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, and joined again in the conversation.

I was astonished at the wit and information he displayed. Mr. Huddlestone's was certainly no ordinary character ; he had read and observed for himself ; his gifts were sound ; and, though I could never have learned to love the man, I began to understand his success in business, and the great respect in which he had been held before his failure. He had, above all, the talent of society ; and though I never heard him speak but on this one and most unfavourable occasion, I set him down among the most brilliant conversationalists I ever met.

He was relating with great gusto, and seemingly no feeling of shame, the manœuvres of a scoundrelly

commission merchant whom he had known and studied in his youth, and we were all listening with an odd mixture of mirth and embarrassment, when our little party was brought abruptly to an end in the most startling manner.

A noise like that of a wet finger on the window-pane interrupted Mr. Huddlestons tale ; and in an instant we were all four as white as paper, and sat tongue-tied and motionless round the table.

‘A snail,’ I said at last ; for I had heard that these animals make a noise somewhat similar in character.

‘Snail be d—d !’ said Northmour. ‘Hush !’

The same sound was repeated twice at regular intervals ; and then a formidable voice shouted through the shutters the Italian word ‘*Traditore !*’

Mr. Huddlestons threw his head in the air ; his eyelids quivered ; next moment he fell insensible below the table. Northmour and I had each run to the armoury and seized a gun. Clara was on her feet with her hand at her throat.

So we stood waiting, for we thought the hour of attack was certainly come ; but second passed after second, and all but the surf remained silent in the neighbourhood of the pavilion.

‘Quick,’ said Northmour ; ‘upstairs with him before they come.’

CHAPTER VIII.

TELLS THE LAST OF THE TALL MAN.

SOMEHOW or other, by hook and crook, and between the three of us, we got Bernard Huddleston bundled upstairs and laid upon the bed in *My Uncle's Room*. During the whole process, which was rough enough, he gave no sign of consciousness, and he remained, as we had thrown him, without changing the position of a finger. His daughter opened his shirt and began to wet his head and bosom; while Northmour and I ran to the window. The weather continued clear; the moon, which was now about full, had risen and shed a very clear light upon the links; yet, strain our eyes as we might, we could distinguish nothing moving. A few dark spots, more or less, on the uneven expanse were not to be identified; they might be crouching men, they might be shadows; it was impossible to be sure.

‘Thank God,’ said Northmour, ‘Aggie is not coming to-night.’

Aggie was the name of the old nurse ; he had not thought of her till now ; but that he should think of her at all, was a trait that surprised me in the man.

We were again reduced to waiting. Northmour went to the fireplace and spread his hands before the red embers, as if he were cold. I followed him mechanically with my eyes, and in so doing turned my back upon the window. At that moment a very faint report was audible from without, and a ball shivered a pane of glass, and buried itself in the shutter two inches from my head. I heard Clara scream ; and though I whipped instantly out of range and into a corner, she was there, so to speak, before me, beseeching to know if I were hurt. I felt that I could stand to be shot at every day and all day long, with such marks of solicitude for a reward ; and I continued to reassure her, with the tenderest caresses and in complete forgetfulness of our situation, till the voice of Northmour recalled me to myself.

‘An air-gun,’ he said. ‘They wish to make no noise.’

I put Clara aside, and looked at him. He was standing with his back to the fire and his hands clasped behind him ; and I knew by the black look on his face, that passion was boiling within. I had seen just such a look before he attacked me, that

March night, in the adjoining chamber ; and, though I could make every allowance for his anger, I confess I trembled for the consequences. He gazed straight before him ; but he could see us with the tail of his eye, and his temper kept rising like a gale of wind. With regular battle awaiting us outside, this prospect of an internecine strife within the walls began to daunt me.

Suddenly, as I was thus closely watching his expression and prepared against the worst, I saw a change, a flash, a look of relief, upon his face. He took up the lamp which stood beside him on the table, and turned to us with an air of some excitement.

‘There is one point that we must know,’ said he. ‘Are they going to butcher the lot of us, or only Huddleston ? Did they take you for him, or fire at you for your own *beaux yeux* ?’

‘They took me for him, for certain,’ I replied. ‘I am near as tall, and my head is fair.’

‘I am going to make sure,’ returned Northmour ; and he stepped up to the window, holding the lamp above his head, and stood there, quietly affronting death, for half a minute.

Clara sought to rush forward and pull him from the place of danger ; but I had the pardonable selfishness to hold her back by force.

‘Yes,’ said Northmour, turning coolly from the window; ‘it’s only Huddleston they want.’

‘Oh, Mr. Northmour!’ cried Clara; but found no more to add; the temerity she had just witnessed seeming beyond the reach of words.

He, on his part, looked at me, cocking his head, with a fire of triumph in his eyes; and I understood at once that he had thus hazarded his life, merely to attract Clara’s notice, and depose me from my position as the hero of the hour. He snapped his fingers.

‘The fire is only beginning,’ said he. ‘When they warm up to their work, they won’t be so particular.’

A voice was now heard hailing us from the entrance. From the window we could see the figure of a man in the moonlight; he stood motionless, his face uplifted to ours, and a rag of something white on his extended arm; and as we looked right down upon him, though he was a good many yards distant on the links, we could see the moonlight glitter on his eyes.

He opened his lips again, and spoke for some minutes on end, in a key so loud that he might have been heard in every corner of the pavilion, and as far away as the borders of the wood. It was the same voice that had already shouted ‘*Traditore!*’ through

the shutters of the dining-room ; this time it made a complete and clear statement. If the traitor 'Oddlestone' were given up, all others should be spared ; if not, no one should escape to tell the tale.

‘ Well, Huddleston, what do you say to that ? ’ asked Northmour, turning to the bed.

Up to that moment the banker had given no sign of life, and I, at least, had supposed him to be still lying in a faint ; but he replied at once, and in such tones as I have never heard elsewhere, save from a delirious patient, adjured and besought us not to desert him. It was the most hideous and abject performance that my imagination can conceive.

‘ Enough,’ cried Northmour ; and then he threw open the window, leaned out into the night, and in a tone of exultation, and with a total forgetfulness of what was due to the presence of a lady, poured out upon the ambassador a string of the most abominable raillery both in English and Italian, and bade him be gone where he had come from. I believe that nothing so delighted Northmour at that moment as the thought that we must all infallibly perish before the night was out.

Meantime the Italian put his flag of truce into his pocket, and disappeared, at a leisurely pace, among the sand-hills.

‘They make honourable war,’ said Northmour. ‘They are all gentlemen and soldiers. For the credit of the thing, I wish we could change sides—you and I, Frank, and you too, Missy my darling—and leave that being on the bed to someone else. Tut! Don’t look shocked! We are all going post to what they call eternity, and may as well be above-board while there’s time. As far as I’m concerned, if I could first strangle Huddlestone and then get Clara in my arms, I could die with some pride and satisfaction. And as it is, by God, I’ll have a kiss!’

Before I could do anything to interfere, he had rudely embraced and repeatedly kissed the resisting girl. Next moment I had pulled him away with fury, and flung him heavily against the wall. He laughed loud and long, and I feared his wits had given way under the strain; for even in the best of days he had been a sparing and a quiet laugher.

‘Now, Frank,’ said he, when his mirth was somewhat appeased, ‘it’s your turn. Here’s my hand. Good-bye; farewell!’ Then, seeing me stand rigid and indignant, and holding Clara to my side—‘Man!’ he broke out, ‘are you angry? Did you think we were going to die with all the airs and graces of society? I took a kiss; I’m glad I

had it ; and now you can take another if you like, and square accounts.'

I turned from him with a feeling of contempt which I did not seek to dissemble.

'As you please,' said he. 'You've been a prig in life ; a prig you'll die.'

And with that he sat down in a chair, a rifle over his knee, and amused himself with snapping the lock ; but I could see that his ebullition of light spirits (the only one I ever knew him to display) had already come to an end, and was succeeded by a sullen, scowling humour.

All this time our assailants might have been entering the house, and we been none the wiser ; we had in truth almost forgotten the danger that so imminently overhung our days. But just then Mr. Huddleston uttered a cry, and leaped from the bed.

I asked him what was wrong.

'Fire !' he cried. 'They have set the house on fire !'

Northmour was on his feet in an instant, and he and I ran through the door of communication with the study. The room was illuminated by a red and angry light. Almost at the moment of our entrance, a tower of flame arose in front of the window, and, with a tingling report, a pane fell inwards on the

carpet. They had set fire to the lean-to out-house, where Northmour used to nurse his negatives.

‘Hot work,’ said Northmour. ‘Let us try in your old room.’

We ran thither in a breath, threw up the case-ment, and looked forth. Along the whole back wall of the pavilion piles of fuel had been arranged and kindled; and it is probable they had been drenched with mineral oil, for, in spite of the morning’s rain, they all burned bravely. The fire had taken a firm hold already on the outhouse, which blazed higher and higher every moment; the back door was in the centre of a red-hot bonfire; the eaves we could see, as we looked upward, were already smouldering, for the roof overhung, and was supported by considerable beams of wood. At the same time, hot, pungent, and choking volumes of smoke began to fill the house. There was not a human being to be seen to right or left.

‘Ah, well!’ said Northmour, ‘here’s the end, thank God.’

And we returned to *My Uncle’s Room*. Mr. Huddlestone was putting on his boots, still violently trembling, but with an air of determination such as I had not hitherto observed. Clara stood close by him, with her cloak in both hands ready to

throw about her shoulders, and a strange look in her eyes, as if she were half hopeful, half doubtful of her father.

‘Well, boys and girls,’ said Northmour, ‘how about a sally? The oven is heating; it is not good to stay here and be baked; and, for my part, I want to come to my hands with them, and be done.’

‘There is nothing else left,’ I replied.

And both Clara and Mr. Huddlestone, though with a very different intonation, added, ‘Nothing.’

As we went downstairs the heat was excessive, and the roaring of the fire filled our ears; and we had scarce reached the passage before the stairs window fell in, a branch of flame shot brandishing through the aperture, and the interior of the pavilion became lit up with that dreadful and fluctuating glare. At the same moment we heard the fall of something heavy and inelastic in the upper story. The whole pavilion, it was plain, had gone alight like a box of matches, and now not only flamed sky-high to land and sea, but threatened with every moment to crumble and fall in about our ears.

Northmour and I cocked our revolvers. Mr. Huddlestone, who had already refused a firearm, put us behind him with a manner of command.

‘Let Clara open the door,’ said he. ‘So, if they fire a volley, she will be protected. And in the meantime stand behind me. I am the scapegoat; my sins have found me out.’

I heard him, as I stood breathless by his shoulder, with my pistol ready, pattering off prayers in a tremulous, rapid whisper; and I confess, horrid as the thought may seem, I despised him for thinking of supplications in a moment so critical and thrilling. In the meantime, Clara, who was dead white but still possessed her faculties, had displaced the barricade from the front door. Another moment, and she had pulled it open. Firelight and moonlight illuminated the links with confused and changeful lustre, and far away against the sky we could see a long trail of glowing smoke.

Mr. Huddlestone, filled for the moment with a strength greater than his own, struck Northmour and myself a back-hander in the chest; and while we were thus for the moment incapacitated from action, lifting his arms above his head like one about to dive, he ran straight forward out of the pavilion.

‘Here am I!’ he cried—‘Huddlestone! Kill me, and spare the others!’

His sudden appearance daunted, I suppose, our hidden enemies; for Northmour and I had time to

recover, to seize Clara between us, one by each arm, and to rush forth to his assistance, ere anything further had taken place. But scarce had we passed the threshold when there came near a dozen reports and flashes from every direction among the hollows of the links. Mr. Huddlestone staggered, uttered a weird and freezing cry, threw up his arms over his head, and fell backward on the turf.

‘*Traditore! Traditore!*’ cried the invisible avengers.

And just then, a part of the roof of the pavilion fell in, so rapid was the progress of the fire. A loud, vague, and horrible noise accompanied the collapse, and a vast volume of flame went soaring up to heaven. It must have been visible at that moment from twenty miles out at sea, from the shore at Graden Wester, and far inland from the peak of Graystiel, the most eastern summit of the Caulder Hills. Bernard Huddlestone, although God knows what were his obsequies, had a fine pyre at the moment of his death.

CHAPTER IX.

TELLS HOW NORTHMOUR CARRIED OUT HIS THREAT.

I SHOULD have the greatest difficulty to tell you what followed next after this tragic circumstance. It is all to me, as I look back upon it, mixed, strenuous, and ineffectual, like the struggles of a sleeper in a nightmare. Clara, I remember, uttered a broken sigh and would have fallen forward to earth, had not Northmour and I supported her insensible body. I do not think we were attacked; I do not remember even to have seen an assailant; and I believe we deserted Mr. Huddlestone without a glance. I only remember running like a man in a panic, now carrying Clara altogether in my own arms, now sharing her weight with Northmour, now scuffling confusedly for the possession of that dear burden. Why we should have made for my camp in the Hemlock Den, or how we reached it, are points lost for ever to my recollection. The first moment at which I became definitely sure,

Clara had been suffered to fall against the outside of my little tent, Northmour and I were tumbling together on the ground, and he, with contained ferocity, was striking for my head with the butt of his revolver. He had already twice wounded me on the scalp; and it is to the consequent loss of blood that I am tempted to attribute the sudden clearness of my mind.

I caught him by the wrist.

‘Northmour,’ I remember saying, ‘you can kill me afterwards. Let us first attend to Clara.’

He was at that moment uppermost. Scarcely had the words passed my lips, when he had leaped to his feet and ran towards the tent; and the next moment, he was straining Clara to his heart and covering her unconscious hands and face with his caresses.

‘Shame!’ I cried. ‘Shame to you, Northmour!’

And, giddy though I still was, I struck him repeatedly upon the head and shoulders.

He relinquished his grasp, and faced me in the broken moonlight.

‘I had you under, and I let you go,’ said he; ‘and now you strike me! Coward!’

‘You are the coward,’ I retorted. ‘Did she wish your kisses while she was still sensible of what

she wanted? Not she! And now she may be dying; and you waste this precious time, and abuse her helplessness. Stand aside, and let me help her.'

He confronted me for a moment, white and menacing; then suddenly he stepped aside.

'Help her then,' said he.

I threw myself on my knees beside her, and loosened, as well as I was able, her dress and corset; but while I was thus engaged, a grasp descended on my shoulder.

'Keep your hands off her,' said Northmour fiercely. 'Do you think I have no blood in my veins?'

'Northmour,' I cried, 'if you will neither help her yourself, nor let me do so, do you know that I shall have to kill you?'

'That is better!' he cried. 'Let her die also, where's the harm? Step aside from that girl! and stand up to fight.'

'You will observe,' said I, half rising, 'that I have not kissed her yet.'

'I dare you to,' he cried.

I do not know what possessed me; it was one of the things I am most ashamed of in my life, though, as my wife used to say, I knew

that my kisses would be always welcome were she dead or living ; down I fell again upon my knees, parted the hair from her forehead, and, with the dearest respect, laid my lips for a moment on that cold brow. It was such a caress as a father might have given ; it was such a one as was not unbecoming from a man soon to die to a woman already dead.

‘ And now,’ said I, ‘ I am at your service, Mr. Northmour.’

But I saw, to my surprise, that he had turned his back upon me.

‘ Do you hear ?’ I asked.

‘ Yes,’ said he, ‘ I do. If you wish to fight, I am ready. If not, go on and save Clara. All is one to me.’

I did not wait to be twice bidden ; but, stooping again over Clara, continued my efforts to revive her. She still lay white and lifeless ; I began to fear that her sweet spirit had indeed fled beyond recall, and horror and a sense of utter desolation seized upon my heart. I called her by name with the most endearing inflections ; I chafed and beat her hands ; now I laid her head low, now supported it against my knee ; but all seemed to be in vain, and the lids still lay heavy on her eyes.

‘Northmour,’ I said, ‘there is my hat. For God’s sake bring some water from the spring.’

Almost in a moment he was by my side with the water.

‘I have brought it in my own,’ he said. ‘You do not grudge me the privilege?’

‘Northmour,’ I was beginning to say, as I laved her head and breast; but he interrupted me savagely.

‘Oh, you hush up!’ he said. ‘The best thing you can do is to say nothing.’

I had certainly no desire to talk, my mind being swallowed up in concern for my dear love and her condition; so I continued in silence to do my best towards her recovery, and, when the hat was empty, returned it to him, with one word—‘More.’ He had, perhaps, gone several times upon this errand, when Clara reopened her eyes.

‘Now,’ said he, ‘since she is better, you can spare me, can you not? I wish you a good night, Mr. Cassilis.’

And with that he was gone among the thicket. I made a fire, for I had now no fear of the Italians, who had even spared all the little possessions left in my encampment; and, broken as she was by the excitement and the hideous catastrophe of the

evening, I managed, in one way or another—by persuasion, encouragement, warmth, and such simple remedies as I could lay my hand on—to bring her back to some composure of mind and strength of body.

Day had already come, when a sharp ‘Hist!’ sounded from the thicket. I started from the ground; but the voice of Northmour was heard adding, in the most tranquil tones: ‘Come here, Cassilis, and alone; I want to show you something.’

I consulted Clara with my eyes, and, receiving her tacit permission, left her alone, and clambered out of the den. At some distance off I saw Northmour leaning against an elder; and, as soon as he perceived me, he began walking seaward. I had almost overtaken him as he reached the outskirts of the wood.

‘Look,’ said he, pausing.

A couple of steps more brought me out of the foliage. The light of the morning lay cold and clear over that well-known scene. The pavilion was but a blackened wreck; the roof had fallen in, one of the gables had fallen out; and, far and near, the face of the links was cicatrised with little patches of burnt furze. Thick smoke still went straight upwards in the windless air of the morning, and a great

pile of ardent cinders filled the bare walls of the house, like coals in an open grate. Close by the islet a schooner yacht lay to, and a well-manned boat was pulling vigorously for the shore.

‘The *Red Earl*!’ I cried. ‘The *Red Earl* twelve hours too late!’

‘Feel in your pocket, Frank. Are you armed?’ asked Northmour.

I obeyed him, and I think I must have become deadly pale. My revolver had been taken from me.

‘You see I have you in my power,’ he continued. ‘I disarmed you last night while you were nursing Clara; but this morning—here—take your pistol. No thanks!’ he cried, holding up his hand. ‘I do not like them; that is the only way you can annoy me now.’

He began to walk forward across the links to meet the boat, and I followed a step or two behind. In front of the pavilion I paused to see where Mr. Huddleston had fallen; but there was no sign of him, nor so much as a trace of blood.

‘Graden Floe,’ said Northmour.

He continued to advance till we had come to the head of the beach.

‘No farther, please,’ said he. ‘Would you like to take her to Graden House?’

‘Thank you,’ replied I; ‘I shall try to get her to the minister’s at Graden Wester.’

The prow of the boat here grated on the beach, and a sailor jumped ashore with a line in his hand.

‘Wait a minute, lads!’ cried Northmour; and then lower and to my private ear: ‘You had better say nothing of all this to her,’ he added.

‘On the contrary!’ I broke out, ‘she shall know everything that I can tell.’

‘You do not understand,’ he returned, with an air of great dignity. ‘It will be nothing to her; she expects it of me. Good-bye!’ he added, with a nod.

I offered him my hand.

‘Excuse me,’ said he. ‘It’s small, I know; but I can’t push things quite so far as that. I don’t wish any sentimental business, to sit by your hearth a white-haired wanderer, and all that. Quite the contrary: I hope to God I shall never again clap eyes on either one of you.’

‘Well, God bless you, Northmour!’ I said heartily.

‘Oh, yes,’ he returned.

He walked down the beach; and the man who was ashore gave him an arm on board, and then shoved off and leaped into the bows himself.

Northmour took the tiller; the boat rose to the waves, and the oars between the thole-pins sounded crisp and measured in the morning air.

They were not yet half way to the *Red Earl*, and I was still watching their progress, when the sun rose out of the sea.

One word more, and my story is done. Years after, Northmour was killed fighting under the colours of Garibaldi for the liberation of the Tyrol.

A LODGING FOR THE NIGHT:

A STORY OF FRANCIS VILLON.

A LODGING FOR THE NIGHT.

It was late in November 1456. The snow fell over Paris with rigorous, relentless persistence ; sometimes the wind made a sally and scattered it in flying vortices ; sometimes there was a lull, and flake after flake descended out of the black night air, silent, circuitous, interminable. To poor people, looking up under moist eyebrows, it seemed a wonder where it all came from. Master Francis Villon had propounded an alternative that afternoon, at a tavern window : was it only Pagan Jupiter plucking geese upon Olympus ? or were the holy angels moulting ? He was only a poor Master of Arts, he went on ; and as the question somewhat touched upon divinity, he durst not venture to conclude. A silly old priest from Montargis, who was among the company, treated the young rascal to a bottle of wine in honour of the jest and the grimaces with which it was accompanied, and swore on his own

white beard that he had been just such another irreverent dog when he was Villon's age.

The air was raw and pointed, but not far below freezing ; and the flakes were large, damp, and adhesive. The whole city was sheeted up. An army might have marched from end to end and not a footfall given the alarm. If there were any belated birds in heaven, they saw the island like a large white patch, and the bridges like slim white spars, on the black ground of the river. High up overhead the snow settled among the tracery of the cathedral towers. Many a niche was drifted full ; many a statue wore a long white bonnet on its grotesque or sainted head. The gargoyles had been transformed into great false noses, drooping towards the point. The crockets were like upright pillows swollen on one side. In the intervals of the wind, there was a dull sound of dripping about the precincts of the church.

The cemetery of St. John had taken its own share of the snow. All the graves were decently covered ; tall white housetops stood around in grave array ; worthy burghers were long ago in bed, benightcapped like their domiciles ; there was no light in all the neighbourhood but a little peep from a lamp that hung swinging in the church choir, and

tossed the shadows to and fro in time to its oscillations. The clock was hard on ten when the patrol went by with halberds and a lantern, beating their hands; and they saw nothing suspicious about the cemetery of St. John.

Yet there was a small house, backed up against the cemetery wall, which was still awake, and awake to evil purpose, in that snoring district. There was not much to betray it from without; only a stream of warm vapour from the chimney-top, a patch where the snow melted on the roof, and a few half-obliterated footprints at the door. But within, behind the shuttered windows, Master Francis Villon the poet, and some of the thievish crew with whom he consorted, were keeping the night alive and passing round the bottle.

A great pile of living embers diffused a strong and ruddy glow from the arched chimney. Before this straddled Dom Nicolas, the Picardy monk, with his skirts picked up and his fat legs bared to the comfortable warmth. His dilated shadow cut the room in half; and the firelight only escaped on either side of his broad person, and in a little pool between his outspread feet. His face had the beery, bruised appearance of the continual drinker's; it was covered with a network of congested veins, purple in

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ordinary circumstances, but now pale violet, for even with his back to the fire the cold pinched him on the other side. His cowl had half fallen back, and made a strange excrescence on either side of his bull neck. So he straddled, grumbling, and cut the room in half with the shadow of his portly frame.

On the right, Villon and Guy Tabary were huddled together over a scrap of parchment; Villon making a ballade which he was to call the 'Ballade of Roast Fish,' and Tabary spluttering admiration at his shoulder. The poet was a rag of a man, dark, little, and lean, with hollow cheeks and thin black locks. He carried his four-and-twenty years with feverish animation. Greed had made folds about his eyes, evil smiles had puckered his mouth. The wolf and pig struggled together in his face. It was an eloquent, sharp, ugly, earthly countenance. His hands were small and prehensile, with fingers knotted like a cord; and they were continually flickering in front of him in violent and expressive pantomime. As for Tabary, a broad, complacent, admiring imbecility breathed from his squash nose and slobbering lips: he had become a thief, just as he might have become the most decent of burgesses, by the imperious chance that rules the lives of human geese and human donkeys.

At the monk's other hand, Montigny and Thevenin Pensete played a game of chance. About the first there clung some flavour of good birth and training, as about a fallen angel ; something long, lithe, and courtly in the person ; something aquiline and darkling in the face. Thevenin, poor soul, was in great feather : he had done a good stroke of knavery that afternoon in the Faubourg St. Jacques, and all night he had been gaining from Montigny. A flat smile illuminated his face ; his bald head shone rosily in a garland of red curls ; his little protuberant stomach shook with silent chucklings as he swept in his gains.

'Doubles or quits ?' said Thevenin.

Montigny nodded grimly.

'*Some may prefer to dine in state,*' wrote Villon, '*On bread and cheese on silver plate.* Or—or—help me out, Guido !'

Tabary giggled.

'*Or parsley on a golden dish,*' scribbled the poet.

The wind was freshening without ; it drove the snow before it, and sometimes raised its voice in a victorious whoop, and made sepulchral grumblings in the chimney. The cold was growing sharper as the night went on. Villon, protruding his lips,

imitated the gust with something between a whistle and a groan. It was an eerie, uncomfortable talent of the poet's, much detested by the Picardy monk.

‘Can’t you hear it rattle in the gibbet?’ said Villon. ‘They are all dancing the devil’s jig on nothing, up there. You may dance, my gallants, you’ll be none the warmer! Whew! what a gust! Down went somebody just now! A medlar the fewer on the three-legged medlar-tree!—I say, Dom Nicolas, it’ll be cold to-night on the St. Denis Road?’ he asked.

Dom Nicolas winked both his big eyes, and seemed to choke upon his Adam’s apple. Mont-faucon, the great grisly Paris gibbet, stood hard by the St. Denis Road, and the pleasantry touched him on the raw. As for Tabary, he laughed immoderately over the medlars; he had never heard anything more light-hearted; and he held his sides and crowed. Villon fetched him a fillip on the nose, which turned his mirth into an attack of coughing.

‘Oh, stop that row,’ said Villon, ‘and think of rhymes to “fish.”’

‘Doubles or quits,’ said Montigny doggedly.

‘With all my heart,’ quoth Thevenin.

‘Is there any more in that bottle?’ asked the monk.

‘Open another,’ said Villon. ‘How do you ever hope to fill that big hogshead, your body, with little things like bottles? And how do you expect to get to heaven? How many angels, do you fancy, can be spared to carry up a single monk from Picardy? Or do you think yourself another Elias—and they’ll send the coach for you?’

‘*Hominibus impossibile*,’ replied the monk, as he filled his glass.

Tabary was in ecstasies.

Villon filliped his nose again

‘Laugh at my jokes, if you like,’ he said.

‘It was very good,’ objected Tabary.

Villon made a face at him. ‘Think of rhymes to “fish,”’ he said. ‘What have you to do with Latin? You’ll wish you knew none of it at the great assizes, when the devil calls for Guido Tabary, clericus—the devil with the hump-back and red-hot finger-nails. Talking of the devil,’ he added in a whisper, ‘look at Montigny!’

All three peered covertly at the gamester. He did not seem to be enjoying his luck. His mouth was a little to a side; one nostril nearly shut, and the other much inflated. The black dog was on his back, as people say, in terrifying nursery metaphor; and he breathed hard under the gruesome burden.

‘He looks as if he could knife him,’ whispered Tabary, with round eyes.

The monk shuddered, and turned his face and spread his open hands to the red embers. It was the cold that thus affected Dom Nicolas, and not any excess of moral sensibility.

‘Come now,’ said Villon—‘about this ballade. How does it run so far?’ And beating time with his hand, he read it aloud to Tabary.

They were interrupted at the fourth rhyme by a brief and fatal movement among the gamesters. The round was completed, and Thevenin was just opening his mouth to claim another victory, when Montigny leaped up, swift as an adder, and stabbed him to the heart. The blow took effect before he had time to utter a cry, before he had time to move. A tremor or two convulsed his frame; his hands opened and shut, his heels rattled on the floor; then his head rolled backward over one shoulder with the eyes wide open; and Thevenin Pensete’s spirit had returned to Him who made it.

Everyone sprang to his feet; but the business was over in two twos. The four living fellows looked at each other in rather a ghastly fashion; the dead man contemplating a corner of the roof with a singular and ugly leer.

‘My God!’ said Tabary; and he began to pray in Latin.

Villon broke out into hysterical laughter. He came a step forward and ducked a ridiculous bow at Thevenin, and laughed still louder. Then he sat down suddenly, all of a heap, upon a stool, and continued laughing bitterly as though he would shake himself to pieces.

Montigny recovered his composure first.

‘Let’s see what he has about him,’ he remarked; and he picked the dead man’s pockets with a practised hand, and divided the money into four equal portions on the table. ‘There’s for you,’ he said.

The monk received his share with a deep sigh, and a single stealthy glance at the dead Thevenin, who was beginning to sink into himself and topple sideways off the chair.

‘We’re all in for it,’ cried Villon, swallowing his mirth. ‘It’s a hanging job for every man jack of us that’s here—not to speak of those who aren’t.’ He made a shocking gesture in the air with his raised right hand, and put out his tongue and threw his head on one side, so as to counterfeit the appearance of one who has been hanged. Then he pocketed his share of the spoil, and executed

a shuffle with his feet as if to restore the circulation.

Tabary was the last to help himself; he made a dash at the money, and retired to the other end of the apartment.

Montigny stuck Thevenin upright in the chair, and drew out the dagger, which was followed by a jet of blood.

‘You fellows had better be moving,’ he said, as he wiped the blade on his victim’s doublet.

‘I think we had,’ returned Villon with a gulp. ‘Damn his fat head!’ he broke out. ‘It sticks in my throat like phlegm. What right has a man to have red hair when he is dead?’ And he fell all of a heap again upon the stool, and fairly covered his face with his hands.

Montigny and Dom Nicolas laughed aloud, even Tabary feebly chiming in.

‘Cry baby,’ said the monk.

‘I always said he was a woman,’ added Montigny with a sneer. ‘Sit up, can’t you?’ he went on, giving another shake to the murdered body. ‘Tread out that fire, Nick!’

But Nick was better employed; he was quietly taking Villon’s purse, as the poet sat, limp and trembling, on the stool where he had been making

a ballade not three minutes before. Montigny and Tabary dumbly demanded a share of the booty, which the monk silently promised as he passed the little bag into the bosom of his gown. In many ways an artistic nature unfits a man for practical existence.

No sooner had the theft been accomplished than Villon shook himself, jumped to his feet, and began helping to scatter and extinguish the embers. Meanwhile Montigny opened the door and cautiously peered into the street. The coast was clear; there was no meddlesome patrol in sight. Still it was judged wiser to slip out severally; and as Villon was himself in a hurry to escape from the neighbourhood of the dead Thevenin, and the rest were in a still greater hurry to get rid of him before he should discover the loss of his money, he was the first by general consent to issue forth into the street.

The wind had triumphed and swept all the clouds from heaven. Only a few vapours, as thin as moonlight, fledted rapidly across the stars. It was bitter cold; and by a common optical effect, things seemed almost more definite than in the broadest daylight. The sleeping city was absolutely still: a company of white hoods, a field full of little Alps, below the twinkling stars. Villon cursed his fortune. Would

it were still snowing! Now, wherever he went, he left an indelible trail behind him on the glittering streets; wherever he went he was still tethered to the house by the cemetery of St. John; wherever he went he must weave, with his own plodding feet, the rope that bound him to the crime and would bind him to the gallows. The leer of the dead man came back to him with a new significance. He snapped his fingers as if to pluck up his own spirits, and choosing a street at random, stepped boldly forward in the snow.

Two things preoccupied him as he went: the aspect of the gallows at Montfaucon in this bright windy phase of the night's existence, for one; and for another, the look of the dead man with his bald head and garland of red curls. Both struck cold upon his heart, and he kept quickening his pace as if he could escape from unpleasant thoughts by mere fleetness of foot. Sometimes he looked back over his shoulder with a sudden nervous jerk; but he was the only moving thing in the white streets, except when the wind swooped round a corner and threw up the snow, which was beginning to freeze, in spouts of glittering dust.

Suddenly he saw, a long way before him, a black clump and a couple of lanterns. The clump was in

motion, and the lanterns swung as though carried by men walking. It was a patrol. And though it was merely crossing his line of march, he judged it wiser to get out of eyeshot as speedily as he could. He was not in the humour to be challenged, and he was conscious of making a very conspicuous mark upon the snow. Just on his left hand there stood a great hotel, with some turrets and a large porch before the door; it was half-ruinous, he remembered, and had long stood empty; and so he made three steps of it and jumped into the shelter of the porch. It was pretty dark inside, after the glimmer of the snowy streets, and he was groping forward with outspread hands, when he stumbled over some substance which offered an indescribable mixture of resistances, hard and soft, firm and loose. His heart gave a leap, and he sprang two steps back and stared dreadfully at the obstacle. Then he gave a little laugh of relief. It was only a woman, and she dead. He knelt beside her to make sure upon this latter point. She was freezing cold, and rigid like a stick. A little ragged finery fluttered in the wind about her hair, and her cheeks had been heavily rouged that same afternoon. Her pockets were quite empty; but in her stocking, underneath the garter, Villon found two of the small coins that went by the name

of whites. It was little enough; but it was always something; and the poet was moved with a deep sense of pathos that she should have died before she had spent her money. That seemed to him a dark and pitiable mystery; and he looked from the coins in his hand to the dead woman, and back again to the coins, shaking his head over the riddle of man's life. Henry V. of England, dying at Vincennes just after he had conquered France, and this poor jade cut off by a cold draught in a great man's doorway, before she had time to spend her couple of whites—it seemed a cruel way to carry on the world. Two whites would have taken such a little while to squander; and yet it would have been one more good taste in the mouth, one more smack of the lips, before the devil got the soul, and the body was left to birds and vermin. He would like to use all his tallow before the light was blown out and the lantern broken.

While these thoughts were passing through his mind, he was feeling, half mechanically, for his purse. Suddenly his heart stopped beating; a feeling of cold scales passed up the back of his legs, and a cold blow seemed to fall upon his scalp. He stood petrified for a moment; then he felt again with one feverish movement; and then his loss burst

upon him, and he was covered at once with perspiration. To spendthrifts money is so living and actual—it is such a thin veil between them and their pleasures! There is only one limit to their fortune—that of time; and a spendthrift with only a few crowns is the Emperor of Rome until they are spent. For such a person to lose his money is to suffer the most shocking reverse, and fall from heaven to hell, from all to nothing, in a breath. And all the more if he has put his head in the halter for it; if he may be hanged to-morrow for that same purse, so dearly earned, so foolishly departed! Villon stood and cursed; he threw the two whites into the street; he shook his fist at heaven; he stamped, and was not horrified to find himself trampling the poor corpse. Then he began rapidly to retrace his steps towards the house beside the cemetery. He had forgotten all fear of the patrol, which was long gone by at any rate, and had no idea but that of his lost purse. It was in vain that he looked right and left upon the snow: nothing was to be seen. He had not dropped it in the streets. Had it fallen in the house? He would have liked dearly to go in and see; but the idea of the grisly occupant unmanned him. And he saw besides, as he drew near, that their efforts to put out the fire had been

unsuccessful; on the contrary, it had broken into a blaze, and a changeful light played in the chinks of door and window, and revived his terror for the authorities and Paris gibbet.

He returned to the hotel with the porch, and groped about upon the snow for the money he had thrown away in his childish passion. But he could only find one white; the other had probably struck sideways and sunk deeply in. With a single white in his pocket, all his projects for a rousing night in some wild tavern vanished utterly away. And it was not only pleasure that fled laughing from his grasp; positive discomfort, positive pain, attacked him as he stood ruefully before the porch. His perspiration had dried upon him; and though the wind had now fallen, a binding frost was setting in stronger with every hour, and he felt benumbed and sick at heart. What was to be done? Late as was the hour, improbable as was success, he would try the house of his adopted father, the chaplain of St. Benoît.

He ran there all the way, and knocked timidly. There was no answer. He knocked again and again, taking heart with every stroke; and at last steps were heard approaching from within. A barred wicket fell open in the iron-studded door, and emitted a gush of yellow light.

‘Hold up your face to the wicket,’ said the chaplain from within.

‘It’s only me,’ whimpered Villon.

‘Oh, it’s only you, is it?’ returned the chaplain; and he cursed him with foul unpriestly oaths for disturbing him at such an hour, and bade him be off to hell, where he came from.

‘My hands are blue to the wrist,’ pleaded Villon: ‘my feet are dead and full of twinges; my nose aches with the sharp air; the cold lies at my heart. I may be dead before morning. Only this once, father, and before God I will never ask again!’

‘You should have come earlier,’ said the ecclesiastic coolly. ‘Young men require a lesson now and then.’ He shut the wicket and retired deliberately into the interior of the house.

Villon was beside himself; he beat upon the door with his hands and feet, and shouted hoarsely after the chaplain.

‘Wormy old fox!’ he cried. ‘If I had my hand under your twist, I would send you flying headlong into the bottomless pit.’

A door shut in the interior, faintly audible to the poet down long passages. He passed his hand over his mouth with an oath. And then the humour

of the situation struck him, and he laughed and looked lightly up to heaven, where the stars seemed to be winking over his discomfiture.

What was to be done ? It looked very like a night in the frosty streets. The idea of the dead woman popped into his imagination, and gave him a hearty fright ; what had happened to her in the early night might very well happen to him before morning. And he so young ! and with such immense possibilities of disorderly amusement before him ! He felt quite pathetic over the notion of his own fate, as if it had been some one else's, and made a little imaginative vignette of the scene in the morning when they should find his body.

He passed all his chances under review, turning the white between his thumb and forefinger. Unfortunately he was on bad terms with some old friends who would once have taken pity on him in such a plight. He had lampooned them in verses, he had beaten and cheated them ; and yet now, when he was in so close a pinch, he thought there was at least one who might perhaps relent. It was a chance. It was worth trying at least, and he would go and see.

On the way, two little accidents happened to him which coloured his musings in a very different man-

ner. For, first, he fell in with the track of a patrol, and walked in it for some hundred yards, although it lay out of his direction. And this spirited him up; at least he had confused his trail; for he was still possessed with the idea of people tracking him all about Paris over the snow, and collaring him next morning before he was awake. The other matter affected him very differently. He passed a street corner, where, not so long before, a woman and her child had been devoured by wolves. This was just the kind of weather, he reflected, when wolves might take it into their heads to enter Paris again; and a lone man in these deserted streets would run the chance of something worse than a mere scare. He stopped and looked upon the place with an unpleasant interest—it was a centre where several lanes intersected each other; and he looked down them all one after another, and held his breath to listen, lest he should detect some galloping black things on the snow or hear the sound of howling between him and the river. He remembered his mother telling him the story and pointing out the spot, while he was yet a child. His mother! If he only knew where she lived, he might make sure at least of shelter. He determined he would inquire upon the morrow; nay, he would go and see her

too, poor old girl! So thinking, he arrived at his destination—his last hope for the night.

The house was quiet dark, like its neighbours; and yet after a few taps, he heard a movement overhead, a door opening, and a cautious voice asking who was there. The poet named himself in a loud whisper, and waited, not without some trepidation, the result. Nor had he to wait long. A window was suddenly opened, and a pailful of slops splashed down upon the doorstep. Villon had not been unprepared for something of the sort, and had put himself as much in shelter as the nature of the porch admitted; but for all that, he was deplorably drenched below the waist. His hose began to freeze almost at once. Death from cold and exposure stared him in the face; he remembered he was of phthisical tendency, and began coughing tentatively. But the gravity of the danger steadied his nerves. He stopped a few hundred yards from the door where he had been so rudely used, and reflected with his finger to his nose. He could only see one way of getting a lodging, and that was to take it. He had noticed a house not far away, which looked as if it might be easily broken into, and thither he betook himself promptly, entertaining himself on the way with the idea of a room still hot, with a table still

loaded with the remains of supper, where he might pass the rest of the black hours, and whence he should issue, on the morrow, with an armful of valuable plate. He even considered on what viands and what wines he should prefer; and as he was calling the roll of his favourite dainties, roast fish presented itself to his mind with an odd mixture of amusement and horror.

‘I shall never finish that ballade,’ he thought to himself; and then, with another shudder at the recollection, ‘Oh, damn his fat head!’ he repeated fervently, and spat upon the snow.

The house in question looked dark at first sight; but as Villon made a preliminary inspection in search of the handiest point of attack, a little twinkle of light caught his eye from behind a curtained window.

‘The devil!’ he thought. ‘People awake! Some student or some saint, confound the crew! Can’t they get drunk and lie in bed snoring like their neighbours! What’s the good of curfew, and poor devils of bell-ringers jumping at a rope’s end in bell-towers? What’s the use of day, if people sit up all night? The gripes to them!’ He grinned as he saw where his logic was leading him. ‘Every man to his business, after all,’ added he, ‘and if

they're awake, by the lord, I may come by a supper honestly for this once, and cheat the devil.'

He went boldly to the door and knocked with an assured hand. On both previous occasions, he had knocked timidly and with some dread of attracting notice; but now when he had just discarded the thought of a burglarious entry, knocking at a door seemed a mighty simple and innocent proceeding. The sound of his blows echoed through the house with thin, phantasmal reverberations, as though it were quite empty; but these had scarcely died away before a measured tread drew near, a couple of bolts were withdrawn, and one wing was opened broadly, as though no guile or fear of guile were known to those within. A tall figure of a man, muscular and spare, but a little bent, confronted Villon. The head was massive in bulk, but finely sculptured; the nose blunt at the bottom, but refining upward to where it joined a pair of strong and honest eyebrows; the mouth and eyes surrounded with delicate markings, and the whole face based upon a thick white beard, boldly and squarely trimmed. Seen as it was by the light of a flickering hand-lamp, it looked perhaps nobler than it had a right to do; but it was a fine face, honourable rather than intelligent, strong, simple, and righteous.

‘You knock late, sir,’ said the old man in resonant, courteous tones.

Villon cringed, and brought up many servile words of apology; at a crisis of this sort, the beggar was uppermost in him, and the man of genius hid his head with confusion.

‘You are cold,’ repeated the old man, ‘and hungry? Well, step in.’ And he ordered him into the house with a noble enough gesture.

‘Some great seigneur,’ thought Villon, as his host, setting down the lamp on the flagged pavement of the entry, shot the bolts once more into their places.

‘You will pardon me if I go in front,’ he said, when this was done; and he preceded the poet upstairs into a large apartment, warmed with a pan of charcoal and lit by a great lamp hanging from the roof. It was very bare of furniture: only some gold plate on a sideboard; some folios; and a stand of armour between the windows. Some smart tapestry hung upon the walls, representing the crucifixion of our Lord in one piece, and in another a scene of shepherds and shepherdesses by a running stream. Over the chimney was a shield of arms.

‘Will you seat yourself,’ said the old man, ‘and forgive me if I leave you? I am alone in my house

to-night, and if you are to eat I must forage for you myself.'

No sooner was his host gone than Villon leaped from the chair on which he had just seated himself, and began examining the room, with the stealth and passion of a cat. He weighed the gold flagons in his hand, opened all the folios, and investigated the arms upon the shield, and the stuff with which the seats were lined. He raised the window curtains, and saw that the windows were set with rich stained glass in figures, so far as he could see, of martial import. Then he stood in the middle of the room, drew a long breath, and retaining it with puffed cheeks, looked round and round him, turning on his heels, as if to impress every feature of the apartment on his memory.

'Seven pieces of plate,' he said. 'If there had been ten, I would have risked it. A fine house, and a fine old master, so help me all the saints!'

And just then, hearing the old man's tread returning along the corridor, he stole back to his chair, and began humbly toasting his wet legs before the charcoal pan.

His entertainer had a plate of meat in one hand and a jug of wine in the other. He set down the plate upon the table, motioning Villon to draw in

his chair, and going to the sideboard, brought back two goblets, which he filled.

‘I drink to your better fortune,’ he said, gravely touching Villon’s cup with his own.

‘To our better acquaintance,’ said the poet, growing bold. A mere man of the people would have been awed by the courtesy of the old seigneur, but Villon was hardened in that matter; he had made mirth for great lords before now, and found them as black rascals as himself. And so he devoted himself to the viands with a ravenous gusto, while the old man, leaning backward, watched him with steady, curious eyes.

‘You have blood on your shoulder, my man,’ he said.

Montigny must have laid his wet right hand upon him as he left the house. He cursed Montigny in his heart.

‘It was none of my shedding,’ he stammered.

‘I had not supposed so,’ returned his host quietly. ‘A brawl?’

‘Well, something of that sort,’ Villon admitted with a quaver.

‘Perhaps a fellow murdered?’

‘Oh, no, not murdered,’ said the poet, more and more confused. ‘It was all fair play—murdered by

accident. I had no hand in it, God strike me dead!' he added fervently.

'One rogue the fewer, I dare say,' observed the master of the house.

'You may dare to say that,' agreed Villon, infinitely relieved. 'As big a rogue as there is between here and Jerusalem. He turned up his toes like a lamb. But it was a nasty thing to look at. I dare say you've seen dead men in your time, my lord?' he added, glancing at the armour.

'Many,' said the old man. 'I have followed the wars, as you imagine.'

Villon laid down his knife and fork, which he had just taken up again.

'Were any of them bald?' he asked.

'Oh yes, and with hair as white as mine.'

'I don't think I should mind the white so much,' said Villon. 'His was red.' And he had a return of his shuddering and tendency to laughter, which he drowned with a great draught of wine. 'I'm a little put out when I think of it,' he went on. 'I knew him—damn him! And then the cold gives a man fancies—or the fancies give a man cold, I don't know which.'

'Have you any money?' asked the old man.

'I have one white,' returned the poet, laughing.

‘I got it out of a dead jade’s stocking in a porch. She was as dead as Cæsar, poor wench, and as cold as a church, with bits of ribbon sticking in her hair. This is a hard world in winter for wolves and wenches and poor rogues like me.’

‘I,’ said the old man, ‘am Enguerrand de la Feuillée, seigneur de Brisetout, bailly du Patatrac. Who and what may you be?’

Villon rose and made a suitable reverence. ‘I am called Francis Villon,’ he said, ‘a poor Master of Arts of this university. I know some Latin, and a deal of vice. I can make chansons, ballades, lais, virelais, and roundels, and I am very fond of wine. I was born in a garret, and I shall not improbably die upon the gallows. I may add, my lord, that from this night forward I am your lordship’s very obsequious servant to command.’

‘No servant of mine,’ said the knight; ‘my guest for this evening, and no more.’

‘A very grateful guest,’ said Villon politely; and he drank in dumb show to his entertainer.

‘You are shrewd,’ began the old man, tapping his forehead, ‘very shrewd; you have learning; you are a clerk; and yet you take a small piece of money off a dead woman in the street. Is it not a kind of theft?’

‘It is a kind of theft much practised in the wars, my lord.’

‘The wars are the field of honour,’ returned the old man proudly. ‘There a man plays his life upon the cast; he fights in the name of his lord the king, his Lord God, and all their lordships the holy saints and angels.’

‘Put it,’ said Villon, ‘that I were really a thief, should I not play my life also, and against heavier odds?’

‘For gain, but not for honour.’

‘Gain?’ repeated Villon with a shrug. ‘Gain! The poor fellow wants supper, and takes it. So does the soldier in a campaign. Why, what are all these requisitions we hear so much about? If they are not gain to those who take them, they are loss enough to the others. The men-at-arms drink by a good fire, while the burgher bites his nails to buy them wine and wood. I have seen a good many ploughmen swinging on trees about the country; ay, I have seen thirty on one elm, and a very poor figure they made; and when I asked someone how all these came to be hanged, I was told it was because they could not scrape together enough crowns to satisfy the men-at-arms.’

‘These things are a necessity of war, which the

low-born must endure with constancy. It is true that some captains drive overhard ; there are spirits in every rank not easily moved by pity ; and indeed many follow arms who are no better than brigands.'

'You see,' said the poet, 'you cannot separate the soldier from the brigand ; and what is a thief but an isolated brigand with circumspect manners ? I steal a couple of mutton chops, without so much as disturbing people's sleep ; the farmer grumbles a bit, but sups none the less wholesomely on what remains. You come up blowing gloriously on a trumpet, take away the whole sheep, and beat the farmer pitifully into the bargain. I have no trumpet ; I am only Tom, Dick, or Harry ; I am a rogue and a dog, and hanging's too good for me—with all my heart ; but just you ask the farmer which of us he prefers, just find out which of us he lies awake to curse on cold nights.'

'Look at us two,' said his lordship. 'I am old, strong, and honoured. If I were turned from my house to-morrow, hundreds would be proud to shelter me. Poor people would go out and pass the night in the streets with their children, if I merely hinted that I wished to be alone. And I find you up, wandering homeless, and picking farthings off dead women by the wayside ! I fear no man and

nothing ; I have seen you tremble and lose countenance at a word. I wait God's summons contentedly in my own house, or, if it please the king to call me out again, upon the field of battle. You look for the gallows ; a rough, swift death, without hope or honour. Is there no difference between these two ?'

'As far as to the moon,' Villon acquiesced. 'But if I had been born lord of Brisetout, and you had been the poor scholar Francis, would the difference have been any the less ? Should not I have been warming my knees at this charcoal pan, and would not you have been groping for farthings in the snow ? Should not I have been the soldier, and you the thief ?'

'A thief !' cried the old man. 'I a thief ! If you understood your words, you would repent them.'

Villon turned out his hands with a gesture of inimitable impudence. 'If your lordship had done me the honour to follow my argument !' he said.

'I do you too much honour in submitting to your presence,' said the knight. 'Learn to curb your tongue when you speak with old and honourable men, or some one hastier than I may reprove you in a sharper fashion.' And he rose and paced the lower end of the apartment, struggling with

anger and antipathy. Villon surreptitiously refilled his cup, and settled himself more comfortably in the chair, crossing his knees and leaning his head upon one hand and the elbow against the back of the chair. He was now replete and warm; and he was in nowise frightened for his host, having gauged him as justly as was possible between two such different characters. The night was far spent, and in a very comfortable fashion after all; and he felt morally certain of a safe departure on the morrow.

‘Tell me one thing,’ said the old man, pausing in his walk. ‘Are you really a thief?’

‘I claim the sacred rights of hospitality,’ returned the poet. ‘My lord, I am.’

‘You are very young,’ the knight continued.

‘I should never have been so old,’ replied Villon, showing his fingers, ‘if I had not helped myself with these ten talents. They have been my nursing mothers and my nursing fathers.’

‘You may still repent and change.’

‘I repent daily,’ said the poet. ‘There are few people more given to repentance than poor Francis. As for change, let somebody change my circumstances. A man must continue to eat, if it were only that he may continue to repent.’

‘The change must begin in the heart,’ returned the old man solemnly.

‘My dear lord,’ answered Villon, ‘do you really fancy that I steal for pleasure? I hate stealing, like any other piece of work or of danger. My teeth chatter when I see a gallows. But I must eat, I must drink, I must mix in society of some sort. What the devil! Man is not a solitary animal—*Cui Deus fœminam tradit*. Make me king’s pantler—make me abbot of St. Denis; make me bailly of the Patatrac; and then I shall be changed indeed. But as long as you leave me the poor scholar Francis Villon, without a farthing, why, of course, I remain the same.’

‘The grace of God is all-powerful.’

‘I should be a heretic to question it,’ said Francis. ‘It has made you lord of Brisetout and bailly of the Patatrac; it has given me nothing but the quick wits under my hat and these ten toes upon my hands. May I help myself to wine? I thank you respectfully. By God’s grace, you have a very superior vintage.’

The lord of Brisetout walked to and fro with his hands behind his back. Perhaps he was not yet quite settled in his mind about the parallel between thieves and soldiers; perhaps Villon had interested

him by some cross-thread of sympathy ; perhaps his wits were simply muddled by so much unfamiliar reasoning ; but whatever the cause, he somehow yearned to convert the young man to a better way of thinking, and could not make up his mind to drive him forth again into the street.

‘There is something more than I can understand in this,’ he said at length. ‘Your mouth is full of subtleties, and the devil has led you very far astray ; but the devil is only a very weak spirit before God’s truth, and all his subtleties vanish at a word of true honour, like darkness at morning. Listen to me once more. I learned long ago that a gentleman should live chivalrously and lovingly to God, and the king, and his lady ; and though I have seen many strange things done, I have still striven to command my ways upon that rule. It is not only written in all noble histories, but in every man’s heart, if he will take care to read. You speak of food and wine, and I know very well that hunger is a difficult trial to endure ; but you do not speak of other wants ; you say nothing of honour, of faith to God and other men, of courtesy, of love without reproach. It may be that I am not very wise—and yet I think I am—but you seem to me like one who has lost his way and made a great error

in life. You are attending to the little wants, and you have totally forgotten the great and only real ones, like a man who should be doctoring a tooth-ache on the Judgment Day. For such things as honour and love and faith are not only nobler than food and drink, but indeed I think that we desire them more, and suffer more sharply for their absence. I speak to you as I think you will most easily understand me. Are you not, while careful to fill your belly, disregarding another appetite in your heart, which spoils the pleasure of your life and keeps you continually wretched ?'

Villon was sensibly nettled under all this sermonising. 'You think I have no sense of honour!' he cried. 'I'm poor enough, God knows! It's hard to see rich people with their gloves, and you blowing in your hands. An empty belly is a bitter thing, although you speak so lightly of it. If you had had as many as I, perhaps you would change your tune. Any way I'm a thief—make the most of that—but I'm not a devil from hell, God strike me dead. I would have you to know I've an honour of my own, as good as yours, though I don't prate about it all day long, as if it was a God's miracle to have any. It seems quite natural to me; I keep it in its box till it's wanted. Why now, look you here,

how long have I been in this room with you? Did you not tell me you were alone in the house? Look at your gold plate! You're strong, if you like, but you're old and unarmed, and I have my knife. What did I want but a jerk of the elbow and here would have been you with the cold steel in your bowels, and there would have been me, linking in the streets, with an armful of gold cups! Did you suppose I hadn't wit enough to see that? And I scorned the action. There are your damned goblets, as safe as in a church; there are you, with your heart ticking as good as new; and here am I, ready to go out again as poor as I came in, with my one white that you threw in my teeth! And you think I have no sense of honour—God strike me dead!

The old man stretched out his right arm. 'I will tell you what you are,' he said. 'You are a rogue, my man, an impudent and a black-hearted rogue and vagabond. I have passed an hour with you. Oh! believe me, I feel myself disgraced! And you have eaten and drunk at my table. But now I am sick at your presence; the day has come, and the night-bird should be off to his roost. Will you go before, or after?'

'Which you please,' returned the poet, rising.

‘I believe you to be strictly honourable.’ He thoughtfully emptied his cup. ‘I wish I could add you were intelligent,’ he went on, knocking on his head with his knuckles. ‘Age, age! the brains stiff and rheumatic.’

The old man preceded him from a point of self-respect; Villon followed, whistling, with his thumbs in his girdle.

‘God pity you,’ said the lord of Brisetout at the door.

‘Good-bye, papa,’ returned Villon with a yawn. ‘Many thanks for the cold mutton.’

The door closed behind him. The dawn was breaking over the white roofs. A chill, uncomfortable morning ushered in the day. Villon stood and heartily stretched himself in the middle of the road.

‘A very dull old gentleman,’ he thought. ‘I wonder what his goblets may be worth.’ .

**THE SIRE DE MALÉTROIT'S
DOOR**

THE SIRE DE MALÉTROIT'S DOOR.

DENIS DE BEAULIEU was not yet two-and-twenty, but he counted himself a grown man, and a very accomplished cavalier into the bargain. Lads were early formed in that rough, warfaring epoch; and when one has been in a pitched battle and a dozen raids, has killed one's man in an honourable fashion, and knows a thing or two of strategy and mankind, a certain swagger in the gait is surely to be pardoned. He had put up his horse with due care, and supped with due deliberation; and then, in a very agreeable frame of mind, went out to pay a visit in the grey of the evening. It was not a very wise proceeding on the young man's part. He would have done better to remain beside the fire or go decently to bed. For the town was full of the troops of Burgundy and England under a mixed command; and though Denis was there on safe-conduct, his safe-conduct was like to serve him little on a chance encounter.

It was September 1429 ; the weather had fallen sharp ; a flighty piping wind, laden with showers, beat about the township ; and the dead leaves ran riot along the streets. Here and there a window was already lighted up ; and the noise of men-at-arms making merry over supper within, came forth in fits and was swallowed up and carried away by the wind. The night fell swiftly ; the flag of England, fluttering on the spire-top, grew ever fainter and fainter against the flying clouds—a black speck like a swallow in the tumultuous, leaden chaos of the sky. As the night fell the wind rose, and began to hoot under archways and roar amid the tree-tops in the valley below the town.

Denis de Beaulieu walked fast and was soon knocking at his friend's door ; but though he promised himself to stay only a little while and make an early return, his welcome was so pleasant, and he found so much to delay him, that it was already long past midnight before he said good-bye upon the threshold. The wind had fallen again in the meanwhile ; the night was as black as the grave ; not a star, nor a glimmer of moonshine, slipped through the canopy of cloud. Denis was ill-acquainted with the intricate lanes of Chateau Landon ; even by daylight he had found some trouble in picking his

way ; and in this absolute darkness he soon lost it altogether. He was certain of one thing only—to keep mounting the hill ; for his friend's house lay at the lower end, or tail, of Chateau Landon, while the inn was up at the head, under the great church spire. With this clue to go upon he stumbled and groped forward, now breathing more freely in open places where there was a good slice of sky overhead, now feeling along the wall in stifling closes. It is an eerie and mysterious position to be thus submerged in opaque blackness in an almost unknown town. The silence is terrifying in its possibilities. The touch of cold window bars to the exploring hand startles the man like the touch of a toad ; the inequalities of the pavement shake his heart into his mouth ; a piece of denser darkness threatens an ambuscade or a chasm in the pathway ; and where the air is brighter, the houses put on strange and bewildering appearances, as if to lead him farther from his way. For Denis, who had to regain his inn without attracting notice, there was real danger as well as mere discomfort in the walk ; and he went warily and boldly at once, and at every corner paused to make an observation.

He had been for some time threading a lane so narrow that he could touch a wall with either hand

when it began to open out and go sharply downward. Plainly this lay no longer in the direction of his inn; but the hope of a little more light tempted him forward to reconnoitre. The lane ended in a terrace with a bartizan wall, which gave an outlook between high houses, as out of an embrasure, into the valley lying dark and formless several hundred feet below. Denis looked down, and could discern a few tree-tops waving and a single speck of brightness where the river ran across a weir. The weather was clearing up, and the sky had lightened, so as to show the outline of the heavier clouds and the dark margin of the hills. By the uncertain glimmer, the house on his left hand should be a place of some pretensions; it was surmounted by several pinnacles and turret-tops; the round stern of a chapel, with a fringe of flying buttresses, projected boldly from the main block; and the door was sheltered under a deep porch carved with figures and overhung by two long gargoyles. The windows of the chapel gleamed through their intricate tracery with a light as of many tapers, and threw out the buttresses and the peaked roof in a more intense blackness against the sky. It was plainly the hotel of some great family of the neighbourhood; and as it reminded Denis of a town house of his own at Bourges, he stood for

some time gazing up at it and mentally gauging the skill of the architects and the consideration of the two families.

There seemed to be no issue to the terrace but the lane by which he had reached it ; he could only retrace his steps, but he had gained some notion of his whereabouts, and hoped by this means to hit the main thoroughfare and speedily regain the inn. He was reckoning without that chapter of accidents which was to make this night memorable above all others in his career ; for he had not gone back above a hundred yards before he saw a light coming to meet him, and heard loud voices speaking together in the echoing narrows of the lane. It was a party of men-at-arms going the night round with torches. Denis assured himself that they had all been making free with the wine-bowl, and were in no mood to be particular about safe-conducts or the niceties of chivalrous war. It was as like as not that they would kill him like a dog and leave him where he fell. The situation was inspiring but nervous. Their own torches would conceal him from sight, he reflected ; and he hoped that they would drown the noise of his footsteps with their own empty voices. If he were but fleet and silent, he might evade their notice altogether.

Unfortunately, as he turned to beat a retreat, his foot rolled upon a pebble; he fell against the wall with an ejaculation, and his sword rang loudly on the stones. Two or three voices demanded who went there—some in French, some in English; but Denis made no reply, and ran the faster down the lane. Once upon the terrace, he paused to look back. They still kept calling after him, and just then began to double the pace in pursuit, with a considerable clank of armour, and great tossing of the torchlight to and fro in the narrow jaws of the passage.

Denis cast a look around and darted into the porch. There he might escape observation, or—if that were too much to expect—was in a capital posture whether for parley or defence. So thinking, he drew his sword and tried to set his back against the door. To his surprise, it yielded behind his weight; and though he turned in a moment, continued to swing back on oiled and noiseless hinges, until it stood wide open on a black interior. When things fall out opportunely for the person concerned, he is not apt to be critical about the how or why, his own immediate personal convenience seeming a sufficient reason for the strangest oddities and revolutions in our sublunary things; and so Denis,

without a moment's hesitation, stepped within and partly closed the door behind him to conceal his place of refuge. Nothing was further from his thoughts than to close it altogether; but for some inexplicable reason—perhaps by a spring or a weight—the ponderous mass of oak whipped itself out of his fingers and clanked to, with a formidable rumble and a noise like the falling of an automatic bar.

The round, at that very moment, debouched upon the terrace and proceeded to summon him with shouts and curses. He heard them ferreting in the dark corners; the stock of a lance even rattled along the outer surface of the door behind which he stood; but these gentlemen were in too high a humour to be long delayed, and soon made off down a corkscrew pathway which had escaped Denis's observation, and passed out of sight and hearing along the battlements of the town.

Denis breathed again. He gave them a few minutes' grace for fear of accidents, and then groped about for some means of opening the door and slipping forth again. The inner surface was quite smooth, not a handle, not a moulding, not a projection of any sort. He got his finger-nails round the edges and pulled, but the mass was immovable. He shook it, it was as firm as a rock. Denis de

Beaulieu frowned and gave vent to a little noiseless whistle. What ailed the door? he wondered. Why was it open? How came it to shut so easily and so effectually after him? There was something obscure and underhand about all this, that was little to the young man's fancy. It looked like a snare; and yet who could suppose a snare in such a quiet by-street and in a house of so prosperous and even noble an exterior? And yet—snare or no snare, intentionally or unintentionally—here he was, prettily trapped; and for the life of him he could see no way out of it again. The darkness began to weigh upon him. He gave ear; all was silent without, but within and close by he seemed to catch a faint sighing, a faint sobbing rustle, a little stealthy creak—as though many persons were at his side, holding themselves quite still, and governing even their respiration with the extreme of slyness. The idea went to his vitals with a shock, and he faced about suddenly as if to defend his life. Then, for the first time, he became aware of a light about the level of his eyes and at some distance in the interior of the house—a vertical thread of light, widening towards the bottom, such as might escape between two wings of arras over a doorway. To see anything was a relief to Denis; it was like a piece of solid ground

to a man labouring in a morass ; his mind seized upon it with avidity ; and he stood staring at it and trying to piece together some logical conception of his surroundings. Plainly there was a flight of steps ascending from his own level to that of this illuminated doorway ; and indeed he thought he could make out another thread of light, as fine as a needle and as faint as phosphorescence, which might very well be reflected along the polished wood of a handrail. Since he had begun to suspect that he was not alone, his heart had continued to beat with smothering violence, and an intolerable desire for action of any sort had possessed itself of his spirit. He was in deadly peril, he believed. What could be more natural than to mount the staircase, lift the curtain, and confront his difficulty at once ? At least he would be dealing with something tangible ; at least he would be no longer in the dark. He stepped slowly forward with outstretched hands, until his foot struck the bottom step ; then he rapidly scaled the stairs, stood for a moment to compose his expression, lifted the arras and went in.

He found himself in a large apartment of polished stone. There were three doors ; one on each of three sides ; all similarly curtained with tapestry. The fourth side was occupied by two

large windows and a great stone chimney-piece, carved with the arms of the Malétroits. Denis recognised the bearings, and was gratified to find himself in such good hands. The room was strongly illuminated ; but it contained little furniture except a heavy table and a chair or two, the hearth was innocent of fire, and the pavement was but sparsely strewn with rushes clearly many days old.

On a high chair beside the chimney, and directly facing Denis as he entered, sat a little old gentleman in a fur tippet. He sat with his legs crossed and his hands folded, and a cup of spiced wine stood by his elbow on a bracket on the wall. His countenance had a strongly masculine cast ; not properly human, but such as we see in the bull, the goat, or the domestic boar ; something equivocal and wheedling, something greedy, brutal, and dangerous. The upper lip was inordinately full, as though swollen by a blow or a toothache ; and the smile, the peaked eyebrows, and the small, strong eyes were quaintly and almost comically evil in expression. Beautiful white hair hung straight all round his head, like a saint's, and fell in a single curl upon the tippet. His beard and moustache were the pink of venerable sweetness. Age, probably in consequence of inordinate precautions, had left no mark upon his hands ; and the

Malétroit hand was famous. It would be difficult to imagine anything at once so fleshy and so delicate in design; the taper, sensual fingers were like those of one of Leonardo's women; the fork of the thumb made a dimpled protuberance when closed; the nails were perfectly shaped, and of a dead, surprising whiteness. It rendered his aspect tenfold more redoubtable, that a man with hands like these should keep them devoutly folded in his lap like a virgin martyr—that a man with so intense and startling an expression of face should sit patiently on his seat and contemplate people with an unwinking stare, like a god, or a god's statue. His quiescence seemed ironical and treacherous, it fitted so poorly with his looks.

Such was Alain, Sire de Malétroit.

Denis and he looked silently at each other for a second or two.

'Pray step in,' said the Sire de Malétroit. 'I have been expecting you all the evening.'

He had not risen, but he accompanied his words with a smile and a slight but courteous inclination of the head. Partly from the smile, partly from the strange musical murmur with which the Sire prefaced his observation, Denis felt a strong shudder of disgust go through his marrow. And what with disgust

and honest confusion of mind, he could scarcely get words together in reply.

‘I fear,’ he said, ‘that this is a double accident. I am not the person you suppose me. It seems you were looking for a visit ; but for my part, nothing was further from my thoughts—nothing could be more contrary to my wishes—than this intrusion.’

‘Well, well,’ replied the old gentleman indulgently, ‘here you are, which is the main point. Seat yourself, my friend, and put yourself entirely at your ease. We shall arrange our little affairs presently.’

Denis perceived that the matter was still complicated with some misconception, and he hastened to continue his explanations.

‘Your door’ he began.

‘About my door?’ asked the other, raising his peaked eyebrows. ‘A little piece of ingenuity.’ And he shrugged his shoulders. ‘A hospitable fancy ! By your own account, you were not desirous of making my acquaintance. We old people look for such reluctance now and then ; and when it touches our honour, we cast about until we find some way of overcoming it. You arrive uninvited, but believe me, very welcome.’

‘You persist in error, sir,’ said Denis. ‘There can be no question between you and me. I am a

stranger in this countryside. My name is Denis, damoiseau de Beaulieu. If you see me in your house, it is only——.

‘My young friend,’ interrupted the other, ‘you will permit me to have my own ideas on that subject. They probably differ from yours at the present moment,’ he added with a leer, ‘but time will show which of us is in the right.’

Denis was convinced he had to do with a lunatic. He seated himself with a shrug, content to wait the upshot ; and a pause ensued, during which he thought he could distinguish a hurried gabbling as of prayer from behind the arras immediately opposite him. Sometimes there seemed to be but one person engaged, sometimes two ; and the vehemence of the voice, low as it was, seemed to indicate either great haste or an agony of spirit. It occurred to him that this piece of tapestry covered the entrance to the chapel he had noticed from without.

The old gentleman meanwhile surveyed Denis from head to foot with a smile, and from time to time emitted little noises like a bird or a mouse, which seemed to indicate a high degree of satisfaction. This state of matters became rapidly insupportable ; and Denis, to put an end to it, remarked politely that the wind had gone down.

The old gentleman fell into a fit of silent laughter, so prolonged and violent that he became quite red in the face. Denis got upon his feet at once, and put on his hat with a flourish.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘if you are in your wits, you have affronted me grossly. If you are out of them, I flatter myself I can find better employment for my brains than to talk with lunatics. My conscience is clear; you have made a fool of me from the first moment; you have refused to hear my explanations; and now there is no power under God will make me stay here any longer; and if I cannot make my way out in a more decent fashion, I will hack your door in pieces with my sword.’

The Sire de Malétroit raised his right hand and wagged it at Denis with the fore and little fingers extended.

‘My dear nephew,’ he said, ‘sit down.’

‘Nephew!’ retorted Denis, ‘you lie in your throat;’ and he snapped his fingers in his face.

‘Sit down, you rogue!’ cried the old gentleman, in a sudden, harsh voice, like the barking of a dog. ‘Do you fancy,’ he went on, ‘that when I had made my little contrivance for the door I had stopped short with that? If you prefer to be bound hand and foot till your bones ache, rise and try to go away. If you

choose to remain a free young buck, agreeably conversing with an old gentleman—why, sit where you are in peace, and God be with you.'

'Do you mean I am a prisoner?' demanded Denis.

'I state the facts,' replied the other. 'I would rather leave the conclusion to yourself.'

Denis sat down again. Externally he managed to keep pretty calm; but within, he was now boiling with anger, now chilled with apprehension. He no longer felt convinced that he was dealing with a madman. And if the old gentleman was sane, what, in God's name, had he to look for? What absurd or tragical adventure had befallen him? What countenance was he to assume?

While he was thus unpleasantly reflecting, the arras that overhung the chapel door was raised, and a tall priest in his robes came forth and, giving a long, keen stare at Denis, said something in an undertone to Sire de Malétroit.

'She is in a better frame of spirit?' asked the latter.

'She is more resigned, messire,' replied the priest.

'Now the Lord help her, she is hard to please!' sneered the old gentleman. 'A likely stripling—

not ill-born—and of her own choosing, too? Why, what more would the jade have?’

‘The situation is not usual for a young damsel,’ said the other, ‘and somewhat trying to her blushes.’

‘She should have thought of that before she began the dance? It was none of my choosing, God knows that: but since she is in it, by our lady, she shall carry it to the end.’ And then addressing Denis, ‘Monsieur de Beaulieu,’ he asked, ‘may I present you to my niece? She has been waiting your arrival, I may say, with even greater impatience than myself.’

Denis had resigned himself with a good grace—all he desired was to know the worst of it as speedily as possible; so he rose at once, and bowed in acquiescence. The Sire de Malétroit followed his example and limped, with the assistance of the chaplain’s arm, towards the chapel-door. The priest pulled aside the arras, and all three entered. The building had considerable architectural pretensions. A light groining sprang from six stout columns, and hung down in two rich pendants from the centre of the vault. The place terminated behind the altar in a round end, embossed and honeycombed with a superfluity of ornament in relief, and pierced by many little windows shaped like stars, trefoils, or wheels. These windows were imperfectly glazed, so that the night

air circulated freely in the chapel. The tapers, of which there must have been half a hundred burning on the altar, were unmercifully blown about ; and the light went through many different phases of brilliancy and semi-eclipse. On the steps in front of the altar knelt a young girl richly attired as a bride. A chill settled over Denis as he observed her costume ; he fought with desperate energy against the conclusion that was being thrust upon his mind ; it could not—it should not—be as he feared.

‘Blanche,’ said the Sire, in his most flute-like tones, ‘I have brought a friend to see you, my little girl ; turn round and give him your pretty hand. It is good to be devout ; but it is necessary to be polite, my niece.’

The girl rose to her feet and turned towards the new comers. She moved all of a piece ; and shame and exhaustion were expressed in every line of her fresh young body ; and she held her head down and kept her eyes upon the pavement, as she came slowly forward. In the course of her advance, her eyes fell upon Denis de Beaulieu’s feet—feet of which he was justly vain, he it remarked, and wore in the most elegant accoutrement even while travelling. She paused—started, as if his yellow boots had conveyed some shocking meaning—and glanced suddenly up

into the wearer's countenance. Their eyes met; shame gave place to horror and terror in her looks; the blood left her lips; with a piercing scream she covered her face with her hands and sank upon the chapel floor.

‘That is not the man!’ she cried. ‘My uncle, that is not the man!’

The Sire de Malétroit chirped agreeably. ‘Of course not,’ he said, ‘I expected as much. It was so unfortunate you could not remember his name.’

‘Indeed,’ she cried, ‘indeed, I have never seen this person till this moment—I have never so much as set eyes upon him—I never wish to see him again. Sir,’ she said, turning to Denis, ‘if you are a gentleman, you will bear me out. Have I ever seen you—have you ever seen me—before this accursed hour?’

‘To speak for myself, I have never had that pleasure,’ answered the young man. ‘This is the first time, messire, that I have met with your engaging niece.’

The old gentleman shrugged his shoulders.

‘I am distressed to hear it,’ he said. ‘But it is never too late to begin. I had little more acquaintance with my own late lady ere I married her; which proves,’ he added with a grimace, ‘that these impromptu marriages may often produce an excellent

understanding in the long-run. As the bridegroom is to have a voice in the matter, I will give him two hours to make up for lost time before we proceed with the ceremony.' And he turned towards the door, followed by the clergyman.

The girl was on her feet in a moment. 'My uncle, you cannot be in earnest,' she said. 'I declare before God I will stab myself rather than be forced on that young man. The heart rises at it; God forbids such marriages; you dishonour your white hair. Oh, my uncle, pity me! There is not a woman in all the world but would prefer death to such a nuptial. Is it possible,' she added, faltering—'is it possible that you do not believe me—that you still think this'—and she pointed at Denis with a tremor of anger and contempt—'that you still think *this* to be the man?'

'Frankly,' said the old gentleman, pausing on the threshold, 'I do. But let me explain to you once for all, Blanche de Malétroit, my way of thinking about this affair. When you took it into your head to dishonour my family and the name that I have borne, in peace and war, for more than three-score years, you forfeited, not only the right to question my designs, but that of looking me in the face. If your father had been alive, he would have

spat on you and turned you out of doors. His was the hand of iron. You may bless your God you have only to deal with the hand of velvet, mademoiselle. It was my duty to get you married without delay. Out of pure goodwill, I have tried to find your own gallant for you. And I believe I have succeeded. But before God and all the holy angels, Blanche de Malétroit, if I have not, I care not one jack-straw. So let me recommend you to be polite to our young friend; for upon my word, your next groom may be less appetising.'

And with that he went out, with the chaplain at his heels; and the arras fell behind the pair.

The girl turned upon Denis with flashing eyes.

'And what, sir,' she demanded, 'may be the meaning of all this?'

'God knows,' returned Denis gloomily. 'I am a prisoner in this house, which seems full of mad people. More I know not; and nothing do I understand.'

'And pray how came you here?' she asked.

He told her as briefly as he could. 'For the rest,' he added, 'perhaps you will follow my example, and tell me the answer to all these riddles, and what, in God's name, is like to be the end of it.'

She stood silent for a little, and he could see her

lips tremble and her tearless eyes burn with a feverish lustre. Then she pressed her forehead in both hands.

‘Alas, how my head aches!’ she said wearily—
‘to say nothing of my poor heart! But it is due to you to know my story, unmaidenly as it must seem. I am called Blanche de Malétroit; I have been without father or mother for—oh! for as long as I can recollect, and indeed I have been most unhappy all my life. Three months ago a young captain began to stand near me every day in church. I could see that I pleased him; I am much to blame, but I was so glad that anyone should love me; and when he passed me a letter, I took it home with me and read it with great pleasure. Since that time he has written many. He was so anxious to speak with me, poor fellow! and kept asking me to leave the door open some evening that we might have two words upon the stair. For he knew how much my uncle trusted me.’ She gave something like a sob at that, and it was a moment before she could go on. ‘My uncle is a hard man, but he is very shrewd,’ she said at last. ‘He has performed many feats in war, and was a great person at court, and much trusted by Queen Isabeau in old days. How he came to suspect me I cannot tell; but it is hard to keep anything from his knowledge; and this morning, as we came

from mass, he took my hand in his, forced it open, and read my little billet, walking by my side all the while. When he had finished, he gave it back to me with great politeness. It contained another request to have the door left open; and this has been the ruin of us all. My uncle kept me strictly in my room until evening, and then ordered me to dress myself as you see me—a hard mockery for a young girl, do you not think so? I suppose, when he could not prevail with me to tell him the young captain's name, he must have laid a trap for him: into which, alas! you have fallen in the anger of God. I looked for much confusion; for how could I tell whether he was willing to take me for his wife on these sharp terms? He might have been trifling with me from the first; or I might have made myself too cheap in his eyes. But truly I had not looked for such a shameful punishment as this! I could not think that God would let a girl be so disgraced before a young man. And now I have told you all; and I can scarcely hope that you will not despise me.

Denis made her a respectful inclination.

‘Madam,’ he said, ‘you have honoured me by your confidence. It remains for me to prove that I am not unworthy of the honour. Is Messire de Malétroit at hand?’

‘I believe he is writing in the *salle without*,’ she answered.

‘May I lead you thither, madam?’ asked Denis, offering his hand with his most courtly bearing.

She accepted it; and the pair passed out of the chapel, Blanche in a very drooping and shamefast condition, but Denis strutting and ruffling in the consciousness of a mission, and the boyish certainty of accomplishing it with honour.

The Sire de Malétroit rose to meet them with an ironical obeisance.

‘Sir,’ said Denis, with the grandest possible air, ‘I believe I am to have some say in the matter of this marriage; and let me tell you at once, I will be no party to forcing the inclination of this young lady. Had it been freely offered to me, I should have been proud to accept her hand, for I perceive she is as good as she is beautiful; but as things are, I have now the honour, messire, of refusing.’

Blanche looked at him with gratitude in her eyes; but the old gentleman only smiled and smiled; until his smile grew positively sickening to Denis.

‘I am afraid,’ he said, ‘Monsieur de Beaulieu, that you do not perfectly understand the choice I have to offer you. Follow me, I beseech you, to this

window.' And he led the way to one of the large windows which stood open on the night. 'You observe,' he went on, 'there is an iron ring in the upper masonry, and reeved through that, a very efficacious rope. Now, mark my words: if you should find your disinclination to my niece's person insurmountable, I shall have you hanged out of this window before sunrise. I shall only proceed to such an extremity with the greatest regret, you may believe me. For it is not at all your death that I desire, but my niece's establishment in life. At the same time, it must come to that if you prove obstinate. Your family, Monsieur de Beaulieu, is very well in its way; but if you sprang from Charlemagne, you should not refuse the hand of a Malétroit with impunity—not if she had been as common as the Paris road—not if she were as hideous as the gargoyle over my door. Neither my niece nor you, nor my own private feelings, move me at all in this matter. The honour of my house has been compromised; I believe you to be the guilty person; at least you are now in the secret; and you can hardly wonder if I request you to wipe out the stain. If you will not, your blood be on your own head! It will be no great satisfaction to me to have your interesting relics kicking their heels in the breeze below my windows.'

but half a loaf is better than no bread, and if I cannot cure the dishonour, I shall at least stop the scandal.'

There was a pause.

'I believe there are other ways of settling such imbroglios among gentlemen,' said Denis. 'You wear a sword, and I hear you have used it with distinction.'

The Sire de Malétroit made a signal to the chaplain, who crossed the room with long silent strides and raised the arras over the third of the three doors. It was only a moment before he let it fall again; but Denis had time to see a dusky passage full of armed men.

'When I was a little younger, I should have been delighted to honour you, Monsieur de Beaulieu,' said Sire Alain; 'but I am now too old. Faithful retainers are the sinews of age, and I must employ the strength I have. This is one of the hardest things to swallow as a man grows up in years; but with a little patience, even this becomes habitual. You and the lady seem to prefer the *salle* for what remains of your two hours; and as I have no desire to cross your preference, I shall resign it to your use with all the pleasure in the world. No haste!' he added, holding up his hand, as he saw a dangerous look

come into Denis de Beaulieu's face. 'If your mind revolts against hanging, it will be time enough two hours hence to throw yourself out of the window or upon the pikes of my retainers. Two hours of life are always two hours. A great many things may turn up in even as little a while as that. And, besides, if I understand her appearance, my niece has still something to say to you. You will not disfigure your last hours by a want of politeness to a lady?'

Denis looked at Blanche, and she made him an imploring gesture.

It is likely that the old gentleman was hugely pleased at this symptom of an understanding; for he smiled on both, and added sweetly: 'If you will give me your word of honour, Monsieur de Beaulieu, to await my return at the end of the two hours before attempting anything desperate, I shall withdraw my retainers, and let you speak in greater privacy with mademoiselle.'

Denis again glanced at the girl, who seemed to beseech him to agree.

'I give you my word of honour,' he said.

Messire de Malétroit bowed, and proceeded to limp about the apartment, clearing his throat the while with that odd musical chirp which had already

grown so irritating in the ears of Denis de Beaulieu. He first possessed himself of some papers which lay upon the table; then he went to the mouth of the passage and appeared to give an order to the men behind the arras; and lastly he hobbled out through the door by which Denis had come in, turning upon the threshold to address a last smiling bow to the young couple, and followed by the chaplain with a hand-lamp.

No sooner were they alone than Blanche advanced towards Denis with her hands extended. Her face was flushed and excited, and her eyes shone with tears.

‘You shall not die!’ she cried, ‘you shall marry me after all.’

‘You seem to think, madam,’ replied Denis, ‘that I stand much in fear of death.’

‘Oh, no, no,’ she said, ‘I see you are no poltroon. It is for my own sake—I could not bear to have you slain for such a scruple.’

‘I am afraid,’ returned Denis, ‘that you underestimate the difficulty, madam. What you may be too generous to refuse, I may be too proud to accept. In a moment of noble feeling towards me, you forgot what you perhaps owe to others.’

He had the decency to keep his eyes upon the

floor as he said this, and after he had finished, so as not to spy upon her confusion. She stood silent for a moment, then walked suddenly away, and falling on her uncle's chair, fairly burst out sobbing. Denis was in the acme of embarrassment. He looked round, as if to seek for inspiration, and seeing a stool, plumped down upon it for something to do. There he sat, playing with the guard of his rapier, and wishing himself dead a thousand times over, and buried in the nastiest kitchen-heap in France. His eyes wandered round the apartment, but found nothing to arrest them. There were such wide spaces between the furniture, the light fell so baldly and cheerlessly over all, the dark outside air looked in so coldly through the windows, that he thought he had never seen a church so vast, nor a tomb so melancholy. The regular sobs of Blanche de Malétroit measured out the time like the ticking of a clock. He read the device upon the shield over and over again, until his eyes became obscured; he stared into shadowy corners until he imagined they were swarming with horrible animals; and every now and again he awoke with a start, to remember that his last two hours were running, and death was on the march.

Oftener and oftener, as the time went on, did

his glance settle on the girl herself. Her face was bowed forward and covered with her hands, and she was shaken at intervals by the convulsive hiccup of grief. Even thus she was not an unpleasant object to dwell upon, so plump and yet so fine, with a warm brown skin, and the most beautiful hair, Denis thought, in the whole world of womankind. Her hands were like her uncle's; but they were more in place at the end of her young arms, and looked infinitely soft and caressing. He remembered how her blue eyes had shone upon him, full of anger, pity, and innocence. And the more he dwelt on her perfections, the uglier death looked, and the more deeply was he smitten with penitence at her continued tears. Now he felt that no man could have the courage to leave a world which contained so beautiful a creature; and now he would have given forty minutes of his last hour to have unsaid his cruel speech.

Suddenly a hoarse and ragged peal of cockcrow rose to their ears from the dark valley below the windows. And this shattering noise in the silence of all around was like a light in a dark place, and shook them both out of their reflections.

'Alas, can I do nothing to help you?' she said, looking up.

‘Madam,’ replied Denis, with a fine irrelevancy, ‘if I have said anything to wound you, believe me, it was for your own sake and not for mine.’

She thanked him with a tearful look.

‘I feel your position cruelly,’ he went on. ‘The world has been bitter hard on you. Your uncle is a disgrace to mankind. Believe me, madam, there is no young gentleman in all France but would be glad of my opportunity, to die in doing you a momentary service.’

‘I know already that you can be very brave and generous,’ she answered. ‘What I *want* to know is whether I can serve you—now or afterwards,’ she added, with a quaver.

‘Most certainly,’ he answered with a smile. ‘Let me sit beside you as if I were a friend, instead of a foolish intruder; try to forget how awkwardly we are placed to one another; make my last moments go pleasantly; and you will do me the chief service possible.’

‘You are very gallant,’ she added, with a yet deeper sadness ‘very gallant and it somehow pains me. But draw nearer, if you please; and if you find anything to say to me, you will at least make certain of a very friendly listener. Ah! Monsieur de Beaulieu,’ she broke forth—‘ah! Mon-

sieur de Beaulieu, how can I look you in the face?' And she fell to weeping again with a renewed effusion.

'Madam,' said Denis, taking her hand in both of his, 'reflect on the little time I have before me, and the great bitterness into which I am cast by the sight of your distress. Spare me, in my last moments, the spectacle of what I cannot cure even with the sacrifice of my life.'

'I am very selfish,' answered Blanche. 'I will be braver, Monsieur de Beaulieu, for your sake. But think if I can do you no kindness in the future—if you have no friends to whom I could carry your adieux. Charge me as heavily as you can; every burden will lighten, by so little, the invaluable gratitude I owe you. Put it in my power to do something more for you than weep.'

'My mother is married again, and has a young family to care for. My brother Guichard will inherit my fiefs; and if I am not in error, that will content him amply for my death. Life is a little vapour that passeth away, as we are told by those in holy orders. When a man is in a fair way and sees all life open in front of him, he seems to himself to make a very important figure in the world. His horse whinnies to him; the trumpets

blow and the girls look out of window as he rides into town before his company; he receives many assurances of trust and regard—sometimes by express in a letter—sometimes face to face, with persons of great consequence falling on his neck. It is not wonderful if his head is turned for a time. But once he is dead, were he as brave as Hercules or as wise as Solomon, he is soon forgotten. It is not ten years since my father fell, with many other knights around him, in a very fierce encounter, and I do not think that any one of them, nor so much as the name of the fight is now remembered. No, no, madam, the nearer you come to it, you see that death is a dark and dusty corner, where a man gets into his tomb and has the door shut after him till the judgment day. I have few friends just now, and once I am dead I shall have none.'

'Ah, Monsieur de Beaulieu!' she exclaimed, 'you forget Blanche de Malétroit.'

'You have a sweet nature, madam, and you are pleased to estimate a little service far beyond its worth.'

'It is not that,' she answered. 'You mistake me if you think I am so easily touched by my own concerns. I say so, because you are the noblest man I have ever met; because I recognise in you a spirit

that would have made even a common person famous in the land.'

'And yet here I die in a mousetrap—with no more noise about it than my own squeaking,' answered he.

A look of pain crossed her face, and she was silent for a little while. Then a light came into her eyes, and with a smile she spoke again.

'I cannot have my champion think meanly of himself. Anyone who gives his life for another will be met in Paradise by all the heralds and angels of the Lord God. And you have no such cause to hang your head. For . . . Pray, do you think me beautiful?' she asked, with a deep flush.

'Indeed, madam, I do,' he said.

'I am glad of that,' she answered heartily. 'Do you think there are many men in France who have been asked in marriage by a beautiful maiden—with her own lips—and who have refused her to her face? I know you men would half despise such a triumph; but believe me, we women know more of what is precious in love. There is nothing that should set a person higher in his own esteem; and we women would prize nothing more dearly.'

'You are very good,' he said; 'but you cannot

make me forget that I was asked in pity and not for love.'

'I am not so sure of that,' she replied, holding down her head. 'Hear me to an end, Monsieur de Beaulieu. I know how you must despise me; I feel you are right to do so; I am too poor a creature to occupy one thought of your mind, although, alas! you must die for me this morning. But when I asked you to marry me, indeed, and indeed, it was because I respected and admired you, and loved you with my whole soul, from the very moment that you took my part against my uncle. If you had seen yourself, and how noble you looked, you would pity rather than despise me. And now,' she went on, hurriedly checking him with her hand, 'although I have laid aside all reserve and told you so much, remember that I know your sentiments towards me already. I would not, believe me, being nobly born, weary you with importunities into consent. I too have a pride of my own: and I declare before the holy mother of God, if you should now go back from your word already given, I would no more marry you than I would marry my uncle's groom.'

Denis smiled a little bitterly.

'It is a small love,' he said, 'that shies at a little pride.'

She made no answer, although she probably had her own thoughts.

‘Come hither to the window,’ he said, with a sigh. ‘Here is the dawn.’

And indeed the dawn was already beginning. The hollow of the sky was full of essential daylight, colourless and clean; and the valley underneath was flooded with a grey reflection. A few thin vapours clung in the coves of the forest or lay along the winding course of the river. The scene disengaged a surprising effect of stillness, which was hardly interrupted when the cocks began once more to crow among the steadings. Perhaps the same fellow who had made so horrid a clangour in the darkness not half an hour before, now sent up the merriest cheer to greet the coming day. A little wind went bustling and eddying among the tree-tops underneath the windows. And still the daylight kept flooding insensibly out of the east, which was soon to grow incandescent and cast up that red-hot cannon-ball, the rising sun.

Denis looked out over all this with a bit of a shiver. He had taken her hand, and retained it in his almost unconsciously.

‘Has the day begun already?’ she said; and then, illogically enough: ‘the night has been so

long! Alas! what shall we say to my uncle when he returns?’

‘What you will,’ said Denis, and he pressed her fingers in his.

She was silent.

‘Blanche,’ he said, with a swift, uncertain, passionate utterance, ‘you have seen whether I fear death. You must know well enough that I would as gladly leap out of that window into the empty air as lay a finger on you without your free and full consent. But if you care for me at all do not let me lose my life in a misapprehension; for I love you better than the whole world; and though I will die for you blithely, it would be like all the joys of Paradise to live on and spend my life in your service.’

As he stopped speaking, a bell began to ring loudly in the interior of the house; and a clatter of armour in the corridor showed that the retainers were returning to their post, and the two hours were at an end.

‘After all that you have heard?’ she whispered, leaning towards him with her lips and eyes.

‘I have heard nothing,’ he replied.

‘The captain’s name was Florimond de Champ-divers,’ she said in his ear.

'I did not hear it,' he answered, taking her supple body in his arms and covered her wet face with kisses.

A melodious chirping was audible behind, followed by a beautiful chuckle, and the voice of Messire de Malédroit wished his new nephew a good morning.

PROVIDENCE AND THE GUITAR

PROVIDENCE AND THE GUITAR.

CHAPTER I.

MONSIEUR LÉON BERTHELINI had a great care of his appearance, and sedulously suited his deportment to the costume of the hour. He affected something Spanish in his air, and something of the bandit, with a flavour of Rembrandt at home. In person he was decidedly small and inclined to be stout; his face was the picture of good humour; his dark eyes, which were very expressive, told of a kind heart, a brisk, merry nature, and the most indefatigable spirits. If he had worn the clothes of the period you would have set him down for a hitherto undiscovered hybrid between the barber, the innkeeper, and the affable dispensing chemist. But in the outrageous bravery of velvet jacket and flapped hat, with trousers that were more accurately described as fleshings, a white handkerchief cavalierly knotted at his neck, a shock of Olympian curls upon his brow, and his feet shod

through all weathers in the slenderest of Molière shoes—you had but to look at him and you knew you were in the presence of a Great Creature. When he wore an overcoat he scorned to pass the sleeves; a single button held it round his shoulders; it was tossed backwards after the manner of a cloak, and carried with the gait and presence of an Almaviva. I am of opinion that M. Berthelini was nearing forty. But he had a boy's heart, gloried in his finery, and walked through life like a child in a perpetual dramatic performance. If he were not Almaviva after all, it was not for lack of making believe. And he enjoyed the artist's compensation. If he were not really Almaviva, he was sometimes just as happy as though he were.

I have seen him, at moments when he has fancied himself alone with his Maker, adopt so gay and chivalrous a bearing, and represent his own part with so much warmth and conscience, that the illusion became catching, and I believed implicitly in the Great Creature's pose.

But, alas! life cannot be entirely conducted on these principles; man cannot live by Almavivery alone; and the Great Creature, having failed upon several theatres, was obliged to step down every evening from his heights, and sing from half-a-dozen

to a dozen comic songs, twang a guitar, keep a country audience in good humour, and preside finally over the mysteries of a tombola.

Madame Berthelini, who was art and part with him in these undignified labours, had perhaps a higher position in the scale of beings, and enjoyed a natural dignity of her own. But her heart was not any more rightly placed, for that would have been impossible; and she had acquired a little air of melancholy, attractive enough in its way, but not good to see like the wholesome, sky-scraping, boyish spirits of her lord.

He, indeed, swam like a kite on a fair wind, high above earthly troubles. Detonations of temper were not unfrequent in the zones he travelled; but sulky fogs and tearful depressions were there alike unknown. A well-delivered blow upon a table, or a noble attitude, imitated from Mélingue or Frederic, relieved his irritation like a vengeance. Though the heaven had fallen, if he had played his part with propriety, Berthelini had been content! And the man's atmosphere, if not his example, reacted on his wife; for the couple doated on each other, and although you would have thought they walked in different worlds, yet continued to walk hand in hand.

It chanced one day that Monsieur and Madame

Berthelini descended with two boxes and a guitar in a fat case at the station of the little town of Castelle-Gâchis, and the omnibus carried them with their effects to the Hotel of the Black Head. This was a dismal, conventual building in a narrow street, capable of standing siege when once the gates were shut, and smelling strangely in the interior of straw and chocolate and old feminine apparel. Berthelini paused upon the threshold with a painful premonition. In some former state, it seemed to him, he had visited a hostelry that smelt not otherwise, and been ill received.

The landlord, a tragic person in a large felt hat, rose from a business table under the key-rack, and came forward, removing his hat with both hands as he did so.

‘Sir, I salute you. May I inquire what is your charge for artists?’ inquired Berthelini, with a courtesy at once splendid and insinuating.

‘For artists?’ said the landlord. His countenance fell and the smile of welcome disappeared. ‘Oh, artists!’ he added brutally; ‘four francs a day.’ And he turned his back upon these inconsiderable customers.

A commercial traveller is received, he also, upon a reduction—yet is he welcome, yet can he command

the fatted calf ; but an artist, had he the manners of an Almaviva, were he dressed like Solomon in all his glory, is received like a dog and served like a timid lady travelling alone.

Accustomed as he was to the rubs of his profession, Berthelini was unpleasantly affected by the landlord's manner.

'Elvira,' said he to his wife, 'mark my words : Castel-le-Gâchis is a tragic folly.'

'Wait till we see what we take,' replied Elvira.

'We shall take nothing,' returned Berthelini ; 'we shall feed upon insults. I have an eye, Elvira ; I have a spirit of divination ; and this place is accursed. The landlord has been discourteous, the Commissary will be brutal, the audience will be sordid and uproarious, and you will take a cold upon your throat. We have been besotted enough to come ; the die is cast—it will be a second Sédan.'

Sédan was a town hateful to the Berthelinis, not only from patriotism (for they were French, and answered after the flesh to the somewhat homely name of Duval), but because it had been the scene of their most sad reverses. In that place they had lain three weeks in pawn for their hotel bill, and had it not been for a surprising stroke of fortune they might have been lying there in pawn until this day.

To mention the name of Sédan was for the Berthelinis to dip the brush in earthquake and eclipse. Count Almaviva slouched his hat with a gesture expressive of despair, and even Elvira felt as if ill-fortune had been personally invoked.

‘Let us ask for breakfast,’ said she, with a woman’s tact.

The Commissary of Police of Castel-le-Gâchis was a large red Commissary, pimpled, and subject to a strong cutaneous transpiration. I have repeated the name of his office because he was so very much more a Commissary than a man. The spirit of his dignity had entered into him. He carried his corporation as if it were something official. Whenever he insulted a common citizen it seemed to him as if he were adroitly flattering the Government by a side wind; in default of dignity he was brutal from an overweening sense of duty. His office was a den, whence passers-by could hear rude accents laying down, not the law, but the good pleasure of the Commissary.

Six several times in the course of the day did M. Berthelini hurry thither in quest of the requisite permission for his evening’s entertainment; six several times he found the official was abroad. Léon Berthelini began to grow quite a familiar figure in the streets of Castel-le-Gâchis; he became a local cele-

brity, and was pointed out as 'the man who was looking for the Commissary.' Idle children attached themselves to his footsteps, and trotted after him back and forward between the hotel and the office. Léon might try as he liked ; he might roll cigarettes, he might straddle, he might cock his hat at a dozen different jaunty inclinations—the part of Alaviva was, under the circumstances, difficult to play.

As he passed the market-place upon the seventh excursion the Commissary was pointed out to him, where he stood, with his waistcoat unbuttoned and his hands behind his back, to superintend the sale and measurement of butter. Berthelini threaded his way through the market stalls and baskets, and accosted the dignitary with a bow which was a triumph of the histrionic art.

'I have the honour,' he asked, 'of meeting M. le Commissaire ?'

The Commissary was affected by the nobility of his address. He excelled Léon in the depth if not in the airy grace of his salutation.

'The honour,' said he, 'is mine !'

'I am,' continued the strolling-player, 'I am, sir, an artist, and I have permitted myself to interrupt you on an affair of business. To-night I give a trifling musical entertainment at the Café of the

Triumphs of the Plough—permit me to offer you this little programme—and I have come to ask you for the necessary authorisation.'

At the word 'artist,' the Commissary had replaced his hat with the air of a person who, having condescended too far, should suddenly remember the duties of his rank.

'Go, go,' said he, 'I am busy—I am measuring butter.'

'Heathen Jew!' thought Léon. 'Permit me, sir,' he resumed, aloud. 'I have gone six times already——'

'Put up your bills if you choose,' interrupted the Commissary. 'In an hour or so I will examine your papers at the office. But now go; I am busy.'

'Measuring butter!' thought Berthelini. 'Oh, France, and it is for this that we made '93!'

The preparations were soon made; the bills posted, programmes laid on the dinner-table of every hotel in the town, and a stage erected at one end of the Café of the Triumphs of the Plough; but when Léon returned to the office, the Commissary was once more abroad.

'He is like Madame Benoiton,' thought Léon, 'Fichu Commissaire!'

And just then he met the man face to face.

‘Here, sir,’ said he, ‘are my papers. Will you be pleased to verify?’

But the Commissary was now intent upon dinner.

‘No use,’ he replied, ‘no use; I am busy; I am quite satisfied. Give your entertainment.’

And he hurried on.

‘Fichu Commissaire!’ thought Léon.

CHAPTER II.

THE audience was pretty large; and the proprietor of the café made a good thing of it in beer. But the Berthelinis exerted themselves in vain.

Léon was radiant in velveteen; he had a rakish way of smoking a cigarette between his songs that was worth money in itself; he underlined his comic points, so that the dullest numskull in Castel-le-Gâchis had a notion when to laugh; and he handled his guitar in a manner worthy of himself. Indeed his play with that instrument was as good as a whole romantic drama; it was so dashing, so florid, and so cavalier.

Elvira, on the other hand, sang her patriotic and romantic songs with more than usual expression; her voice had charm and plangency; and as Léon looked at her, in her low-bodied maroon dress, with her arms bare to the shoulder, and a red flower set provocatively in her corset, he repeated to himself for the many hundredth time

that she was one of the loveliest creatures in the world of women.

Alas! when she went round with the tambourine, the golden youth of Castel-le-Gâchis turned from her coldly. Here and there a single halfpenny was forthcoming; the net result of a collection never exceeded half a franc; and the Maire himself, after seven different applications, had contributed exactly twopence. A certain chill began to settle upon the artists themselves; it seemed as if they were singing to slugs; Apollo himself might have lost heart with such an audience. The Berthelinis struggled against the impression; they put their back into their work, they sang loud and louder, the guitar twanged like a living thing; and at last Léon arose in his might, and burst with inimitable conviction into his great song, 'Y a des honnêtes gens partout!' Never had he given more proof of his artistic mastery; it was his intimate, indefeasible conviction that Castel-le-Gâchis formed an exception to the law he was now lyrically proclaiming, and was peopled exclusively by thieves and bullies; and yet, as I say, he flung it down like a challenge, he trolled it forth like an article of faith; and his face so beamed the while that you would have thought he must make converts of the benches.

He was at the top of his register, with his head thrown back and his mouth open, when the door was thrown violently open, and a pair of new comers marched noisily into the café. It was the Commissary, followed by the Garde Champêtre.

The undaunted Berthelini still continued to proclaim, 'Y a des honnêtes gens partout!' But now the sentiment produced an audible titter among the audience. Berthelini wondered why; he did not know the antecedents of the Garde Champêtre; he had never heard of a little story about postage stamps. But the public knew all about the postage stamps and enjoyed the coincidence hugely.

The Commissary planted himself upon a vacant chair with somewhat the air of Cromwell visiting the Rump, and spoke in occasional whispers to the Garde Champêtre, who remained respectfully standing at his back. The eyes of both were directed upon Berthelini, who persisted in his statement.

'Y a des honnêtes gens partout,' he was just chanting for the twentieth time; when up got the Commissary upon his feet and waved brutally to the singer with his cane.

'Is it me you want?' inquired Léon, stopping in his song.

'It is you,' replied the potentate.

‘Fichu Commissaire!’ thought Léon, and he descended from the stage and made his way to the functionary.

‘How does it happen, sir,’ said the Commissary, swelling in person, ‘that I find you mountebanking in a public café without my permission?’

‘Without?’ cried the indignant Léon. ‘Permit me to remind you——’

‘Come, come, sir!’ said the Commissary, ‘I desire no explanations.’

‘I care nothing about what you desire,’ returned the singer. ‘I choose to give them, and I will not be gagged. I am an artist, sir, a distinction that you cannot comprehend. I received your permission and stand here upon the strength of it; interfere with me who dare.’

‘You have not got my signature, I tell you,’ cried the Commissary. ‘Show me my signature! Where is my signature?’

That was just the question; where was his signature? Léon recognised that he was in a hole; but his spirit rose with the occasion, and he blustered nobly, tossing back his curls. The Commissary played up to him in the character of tyrant; and as the one leaned farther forward, the other leaned farther back—majesty confronting fury. The

audience had transferred their attention to this new performance, and listened with that silent gravity common to all Frenchmen in the neighbourhood of the Police. Elvira had sat down, she was used to these distractions, and it was rather melancholy than fear that now oppressed her.

‘Another word,’ cried the Commissary, ‘and I arrest you.’

‘Arrest me?’ shouted Léon. ‘I defy you!’

‘I am the Commissary of Police,’ said the official.

Léon commanded his feelings, and replied, with great delicacy of innuendo—

‘So it would appear.’

The point was too refined for Castel-le-Gâchis; it did not raise a smile; and as for the Commissary, he simply bade the singer follow him to his office, and directed his proud footsteps towards the door. There was nothing for it but to obey. Léon did so with a proper pantomime of indifference, but it was a leek to eat, and there was no denying it.

The Maire had slipped out and was already waiting at the Commissary’s door. Now the Maire, in France, is the refuge of the oppressed. He stands between his people and the boisterous rigours of the Police. He can sometimes understand what

is said to him; he is not always puffed up beyond measure by his dignity. 'Tis a thing worth the knowledge of travellers. When all seems over, and a man has made up his mind to injustice, he has still, like the heroes of romance, a little bugle at his belt whereon to blow; and the Maire, a comfortable *deus ex machina*, may still descend to deliver him from the minions of the law. The Maire of Castelle-Gâchis, although inaccessible to the charms of music as retailed by the Berthelinis, had no hesitation whatever as to the rights of the matter. He instantly fell foul of the Commissary in very high terms, and the Commissary, pricked by this humiliation, accepted battle on the point of fact. The argument lasted some little while with varying success, until at length victory inclined so plainly to the Commissary's side that the Maire was fain to re-assert himself by an exercise of authority. He had been out-argued, but he was still the Maire. And so, turning from his interlocutor, he briefly but kindly recommended Léon to get back instanter to his concert.

'It is already growing late,' he added.

Léon did not wait to be told twice. He returned to the Café of the Triumphs of the Plough with all expedition. Alas! the audience had melted

away during his absence ; Elvira was sitting in a very disconsolate attitude on the guitar-box ; she had watched the company dispersing by twos and threes, and the prolonged spectacle had somewhat overwhelmed her spirits. Each man, she reflected, retired with a certain proportion of her earnings in his pocket, and she saw to-night's board and to-morrow's railway expenses, and finally even to-morrow's dinner, walk one after another out of the café door and disappear into the night.

‘What was it ?’ she asked, languidly.

But Léon did not answer. He was looking round him on the scene of defeat. Scarce a score of listeners remained, and these of the least promising sort. The minute hand of the clock was already climbing upward towards eleven.

‘It's a lost battle,’ said he, and then taking up the money-box, he turned it out. ‘Three francs seventy-five !’ he cried, ‘as against four of board and six of railway fares ; and no time for the tombola ! Elvira, this is Waterloo.’ And he sat down and passed both hands desperately among his curls. ‘O Fichu Commissaire !’ he cried, ‘Fichu Commissaire !’

‘Let us get the things together and be off,’ returned Elvira. ‘We might try another song, but there is not six halfpence in the room.’

‘Six halfpence?’ cried Léon, ‘six hundred thousand devils! There is not a human creature in the town—nothing but pigs and dogs and commissaries! Pray heaven, we get safe to bed.’

‘Don’t imagine things!’ exclaimed Elvira, with a shudder.

And with that they set to work on their preparations. The tobacco-jar, the cigarette-holder, the three papers of shirt-studs, which were to have been the prizes of the tombola had the tombola come off, were made into a bundle with the music; the guitar was stowed into the fat guitar-case; and Elvira having thrown a thin shawl about her neck and shoulders, the pair issued from the café and set off for the Black Head.

As they crossed the market-place the church bell rang out eleven. It was a dark, mild night, and there was no one in the streets.

‘It is all very fine,’ said Léon: ‘but I have a presentiment. The night is not yet done.’

CHAPTER III.

THE "Black Head" presented not a single chink of light upon the street, and the carriage gate was closed.

'This is unprecedented,' observed Léon. 'An inn closed by five minutes after eleven! And there were several commercial travellers in the café up to a late hour. Elvira, my heart misgives me. Let us ring the bell.'

The bell had a potent note; and being swung under the arch it filled the house from top to bottom with surly, clanging reverberations. The sound accentuated the conventual appearance of the building; a wintry sentiment, a thought of prayer and mortification, took hold upon Elvira's mind; and, as for Léon, he seemed to be reading the stage directions for a lugubrious fifth act.

'This is your fault,' said Elvira: 'this is what comes of fancying things!'

Again Léon pulled the bell-rope; again the solemn tocsin awoke the echoes of the inn; and ere

they had died away, a light glimmered in the carriage entrance, and a powerful voice was heard upraised and tremulous with wrath.

‘What’s all this?’ cried the tragic host through the spars of the gate. ‘Hard upon twelve, and you come clamouring like Prussians at the door of a respectable hotel? Oh!’ he cried, ‘I know you now! Common singers! People in trouble with the police! And you present yourselves at midnight like lords and ladies? Be off with you!’

‘You will permit me to remind you,’ replied Léon, in thrilling tones, ‘that I am a guest in your house, that I am properly inscribed, and that I have deposited baggage to the value of four hundred francs.’

‘You cannot get in at this hour,’ returned the man. ‘This is no thieves’ tavern, for mohocks and night rakes and organ-grinders.’

‘Brute!’ cried Elvira, for the organ-grinders touched her home.

‘Then I demand my baggage,’ said Léon, with unabated dignity.

‘I know nothing of your baggage,’ replied the landlord.

‘You detain my baggage? You dare to detain my baggage?’ cried the singer.

‘Who are you?’ returned the landlord. ‘It is dark—I cannot recognise you.’

‘Very well, then—you detain my baggage,’ concluded Léon. ‘You shall smart for this. I will weary out your life with persecutions; I will drag you from court to court; if there is justice to be had in France, it shall be rendered between you and me. And I will make you a by-word—I will put you in a song—a scurrilous song—an indecent song—a popular song—which the boys shall sing to you in the street, and come and howl through these spars at midnight!’

He had gone on raising his voice at every phrase, for all the while the landlord was very placidly retiring; and now, when the last glimmer of light had vanished from the arch, and the last footstep died away in the interior, Léon turned to his wife with a heroic countenance.

‘Elvira,’ said he, ‘I have now a duty in life. I shall destroy that man as Eugène Sue destroyed the concierge. Let us come at once to the Gendarmerie and begin our vengeance.’

He picked up the guitar-case, which had been propped against the wall, and they set forth through the silent and ill-lighted town with burning hearts.

The Gendarmerie was concealed beside the tele-

graph office at the bottom of a vast court, which was partly laid out in gardens; and here all the shepherds of the public lay locked in grateful sleep. It took a deal of knocking to waken one; and he, when he came at last to the door, could find no other remark but that 'it was none of his business.' Léon reasoned with him, threatened him, besought him; 'here,' he said, 'was Madame Berthelini in evening dress—a delicate woman—in an interesting condition'—the last was thrown in, I fancy, for effect; and to all this the man-at-arms made the same answer:

'It is none of my business,' said he.

'Very well,' said Léon, 'then we shall go to the Commissary.' Thither they went; the office was closed and dark; but the house was close by, and Léon was soon swinging the bell like a madman. The Commissary's wife appeared at a window. She was a thread-paper creature, and informed them that the Commissary had not yet come home.

'Is he at the Maire's?' demanded Léon.

She thought that was not unlikely.

'Where is the Maire's house?' he asked.

And she gave him some rather vague information on that point.

'Stay you here, Elvira,' said Léon, 'lest I should

miss him by the way. If, when I return, I find you here no longer, I shall follow at once to the Black Head.'

And he set out to find the Maire's. It took him some ten minutes wandering among blind lanes, and when he arrived it was already half an hour past midnight. A long white garden wall overhung by some thick chestnuts, a door with a letter-box, and an iron bell-pull, that was all that could be seen of the Maire's domicile. Léon took the bell-pull in both hands, and danced furiously upon the side-walk. The bell itself was just upon the other side of the wall, it responded to his activity, and scattered an alarming clangour far and wide into the night.

A window was thrown open in a house across the street, and a voice inquired the cause of this untimely uproar.

'I wish the Maire,' said Léon.

'He has been in bed this hour,' returned the voice.

'He must get up again,' retorted Léon, and he was for tackling the bell-pull once more.

'You will never make him hear,' responded the voice. 'The garden is of great extent, the house is at the farther end, and both the Maire and his housekeeper are deaf.'

'Aha!' said Léon, pausing. 'The Maire is

deaf, is he? That explains.' And he thought of the evening's concert with a momentary feeling of relief. 'Ah!' he continued, 'and so the Maire is deaf, and the garden vast, and the house at the far end?'

'And you might ring all night,' added the voice, 'and be none the better for it. You would only keep me awake.'

'Thank you, neighbour,' replied the singer. 'You shall sleep.'

And he made off again at his best pace for the Commissary's. Elvira was still walking to and fro before the door.

'He has not come?' asked Léon.

'Not he,' she replied.

'Good,' returned Léon. 'I am sure our man's inside. Let me see the guitar-case. I shall lay this siege in form, Elvira; I am angry; I am indignant; I am truculently inclined; but I thank my Maker I have still a sense of fun. The unjust judge shall be importuned in a serenade, Elvira. Set him up—and set him up.'

He had the case opened by this time, struck a few chords, and fell into an attitude which was irresistibly Spanish.

'Now,' he continued, 'feel your voice. Are you ready? Follow me!'

The guitar twanged, and the two voices upraised, in harmony and with a startling loudness, the chorus of a song of old Béranger's :—

‘Commissaire ! Commissaire !
Colin bat sa ménagère.’

The stones of Castel-le-Gâchis thrilled at this audacious innovation. Hitherto had the night been sacred to repose and nightcaps ; and now what was this ? Window after window was opened ; matches scratched, and candles began to flicker ; swollen sleepy faces peered forth into the starlight. There were the two figures before the Commissary's house, each bolt upright, with head thrown back and eyes interrogating the starry heavens ; the guitar wailed, shouted, and reverberated like half an orchestra ; and the voices, with a crisp and spirited delivery, hurled the appropriate burden at the Commissary's window. All the echoes repeated the functionary's name. It was more like an entr'acte in a farce of Molière's than a passage of real life in Castel-le-Gâchis.

The Commissary, if he was not the first, was not the last of the neighbours to yield to the influence of music, and furiously throw open the window of his bedroom. He was beside himself with rage. He leaned far over the window-sill, raving and

gesticulating; the tassel of his white night-cap danced like a thing of life: he opened his mouth to dimensions hitherto unprecedented, and yet his voice, instead of escaping from it in a roar, came forth shrill and choked and tottering. A little more serenading, and it was clear he would be better acquainted with the apoplexy.

I scorn to reproduce his language; he touched upon too many serious topics by the way for a quiet story-teller. Although he was known for a man who was prompt with his tongue, and had a power of strong expression at command, he excelled himself so remarkably this night that one maiden lady, who had got out of bed like the rest to hear the serenade, was obliged to shut her window at the second clause. Even what she had heard disquieted her conscience; and next day she said she scarcely reckoned as a maiden lady any longer.

Léon tried to explain his predicament, but he received nothing but threats of arrest by way of answer.

‘If I come down to you!’ cried the Commissary.

‘Aye,’ said Léon, ‘do!’

‘I will not!’ cried the Commissary.

‘You dare not!’ answered Léon.

At that the Commissary closed his window.

‘All is over,’ said the singer. ‘The serenade was perhaps ill-judged. These boors have no sense of humour.’

‘Let us get away from here,’ said Elvira, with a shiver. ‘All these people looking—it is so rude and so brutal.’ And then giving way once more to passion—‘Brutes!’ she cried aloud to the candle-lit spectators—‘brutes! brutes! brutes!’

‘Sauve qui peut,’ said Léon. ‘You have done it now!’

And taking the guitar in one hand and the case in the other, he led the way with something too precipitate to be merely called precipitation from the scene of this absurd adventure.

CHAPTER IV.

To the west of Castel-le-Gâchis four rows of venerable lime-trees formed, in this starry night, a twilit avenue with two side aisles of pitch darkness. Here and there stone benches were disposed between the trunks. There was not a breath of wind; a heavy atmosphere of perfume hung about the alleys; and every leaf stood stock-still upon its twig. Hither, after vainly knocking at an inn or two, the Berthe-linis came at length to pass the night. After an amiable contention, Léon insisted on giving his coat to Elvira, and they sat down together on the first bench in silence. Léon made a cigarette, which he smoked to an end, looking up into the trees, and, beyond them, at the constellations, of which he tried vainly to recall the names. The silence was broken by the church bell; it rang the four quarters on a light and tinkling measure; then followed a single deep stroke that died slowly away with a thrill; and stillness resumed its empire.

‘One,’ said Léon. ‘Four hours till daylight. It is warm; it is starry; I have matches and tobacco. Do not let us exaggerate, Elvira—the experience is positively charming. I feel a glow within me; I am born again. This is the poetry of life. Think of Cooper’s novels, my dear.’

‘Léon,’ she said, fiercely, ‘how can you talk such wicked, infamous nonsense? To pass all night out of doors—it is like a nightmare! We shall die.’

‘You suffer yourself to be led away,’ he replied, soothingly. ‘It is not unpleasant here; only you brood. Come, now, let us repeat a scene. Shall we try *Alceste and Célimène*? No? Or a passage from the “Two Orphans”? Come, now, it will occupy your mind; I will play up to you as I never have played before; I feel art moving in my bones.’

‘Hold your tongue,’ she cried, ‘or you will drive me mad! Will nothing solemnise you—not even this hideous situation?’

‘Oh, hideous!’ objected Léon. ‘Hideous is not the word. Why, where would you be? “Dites, la jeune belle, où voulez-vous aller?”’ he carolled. ‘Well, now,’ he went on, opening the guitar-case, ‘there’s another idea for you—sing. Sing “Dites, la jeune belle”! It will compose your spirits, Elvira, I am sure.’

And without waiting an answer he began to strum the symphony. The first chords awoke a young man who was lying asleep upon a neighbouring bench.

‘Hullo!’ cried the young man, ‘who are you?’

‘Under which king, Bezonian?’ declaimed the artist. ‘Speak or die!’

Or if it was not exactly that, it was something to much the same purpose from a French tragedy.

The young man drew near in the twilight. He was a tall, powerful, gentlemanly fellow, with a somewhat puffy face, dressed in a grey tweed suit, with a deer-stalker hat of the same material; and as he now came forward he carried a knapsack slung upon one arm.

‘Are you camping out here too?’ he asked, with a strong English accent. ‘I’m not sorry for company.’

Léon explained their misadventure; and the other told them that he was a Cambridge undergraduate on a walking tour, that he had run short of money, could no longer pay for his night’s lodging, had already been camping out for two nights, and feared he should require to continue the same manœuvre for at least two nights more.

‘Luckily, it’s jolly weather,’ he concluded.

‘You hear that, Elvira,’ said Léon. ‘Madame

Berthelini,' he went on, 'is ridiculously affected by this trifling occurrence. For my part, I find it romantic and far from uncomfortable; or at least,' he added, shifting on the stone bench, 'not quite so uncomfortable as might have been expected. But pray be seated.'

'Yes,' returned the undergraduate, sitting down, 'it's rather nice than otherwise when once you're used to it; only it's devilish difficult to get washed. I like the fresh air and these stars and things.'

'Aha!' said Léon, 'Monsieur is an artist.'

'An artist?' returned the other, with a blank stare. 'Not if I know it!'

'Pardon me,' said the actor. 'What you said this moment about the orbs of heaven——'

'Oh, nonsense!' cried the Englishman. 'A fellow may admire the stars and be anything he likes.'

'You have an artist's nature, however, Mr.— I beg your pardon; may I, without indiscretion, inquire your name?' asked Léon.

'My name is Stubbs,' replied the Englishman.

'I thank you,' returned Léon. 'Mine is Berthelini—Léon Berthelini, ex-artist of the theatres of Montrouge, Belleville, and Montmartre. Humble as you see me, I have created with applause more than one important rôle. The Press were unanimous in

praise of my Howling Devil of the Mountains, in the piece of the same name. Madame, whom I now present to you, is herself an artist, and I must not omit to state, a better artist than her husband. She also is a creator; she created nearly twenty successful songs at one of the principal Parisian music-halls. But, to continue, I was saying you had an artist's nature, Monsieur Stubbs, and you must permit me to be a judge in such a question. I trust you will not falsify your instincts; let me beseech you to follow the career of an artist.'

'Thank you,' returned Stubbs, with a chuckle. 'I'm going to be a banker.'

'No,' said Léon, 'do not say so. Not that. A man with such a nature as yours should not derogate so far. What are a few privations here and there, so long as you are working for a high and noble goal?'

'This fellow's mad,' thought Stubbs; 'but the woman's rather pretty, and he's not bad fun himself, if you come to that.' What he said was different. 'I thought you said you were an actor?'

'I certainly did so,' replied Léon. 'I am one, or, alas! I was.'

'And so you want me to be an actor, do you?' continued the undergraduate. 'Why, man, I could never so much as learn the stuff; my memory's like

a sieve ; and as for acting, I've no more idea than a cat.'

'The stage is not the only course,' said Léon. 'Be a sculptor, be a dancer, be a poet or a novelist ; follow your heart, in short, and do some thorough work before you die.'

'And do you call all these things *art*?' inquired Stubbs.

'Why, certainly!' returned Léon. 'Are they not all branches?'

'Oh! I didn't know,' replied the Englishman. 'I thought an artist meant a fellow who painted.'

The singer stared at him in some surprise.

'It is the difference of language,' he said at last. 'This Tower of Babel, when shall we have paid for it? If I could speak English you would follow me more readily.'

'Between you and me, I don't believe I should,' replied the other. 'You seem to have thought a devil of a lot about this business. For my part, I admire the stars, and like to have them shining—it's so cheery—but hang me if I had an idea it had anything to do with art! It's not in my line, you see. I'm not intellectual ; I have no end of trouble to scrape through my exams., I can tell you! But I'm not a bad sort at bottom,' he added, seeing his

interlocutor looked distressed even in the dim star-shine, 'and I rather like the play, and music, and guitars, and things.'

Léon had a perception that the understanding was incomplete. He changed the subject.

'And so you travel on foot?' he continued. 'How romantic! How courageous! And how are you pleased with my land? How does the scenery affect you among these wild hills of ours?'

'Well, the fact is,' began Stubbs—he was about to say that he didn't care for scenery, which was not at all true, being, on the contrary, only an athletic undergraduate pretension; but he had begun to suspect that Berthelini liked a different sort of meat, and substituted something else—'The fact is, I think it jolly. They told me it was no good up here; even the guide-book said so; but I don't know what they meant. I think it is deuced pretty—upon my word, I do.'

At this moment, in the most unexpected manner, Elvira burst into tears.

'My voice!' she cried. 'Léon, if I stay here longer I shall lose my voice!'

'You shall not stay another moment,' cried the actor. 'If I have to beat in a door, if I have to burn the town, I shall find you shelter.'

With that, he replaced the guitar, and comforting her with some caresses, drew her arm through his.

‘Monsieur Stubbs,’ said he, taking off his hat, ‘the reception I offer you is rather problematical; but let me beseech you to give us the pleasure of your society. You are a little embarrassed for the moment; you must, indeed, permit me to advance what may be necessary. I ask it as a favour; we must not part so soon after having met so strangely.’

‘Oh, come, you know,’ said Stubbs, ‘I can’t let a fellow like you——’ And there he paused, feeling somehow or other on a wrong tack.

‘I do not wish to employ menaces,’ continued Léon, with a smile; ‘but if you refuse, indeed I shall not take it kindly.’

‘I don’t quite see my way out of it,’ thought the undergraduate; and then, after a pause, he said, aloud and ungraciously enough, ‘All right. I—I’m very much obliged, of course.’ And he proceeded to follow them, thinking in his heart, ‘But it’s bad form, all the same, to force an obligation on a fellow.’

CHAPTER V.

LÉON strode ahead as if he knew exactly where he was going ; the sobs of Madame were still faintly audible, and no one uttered a word. A dog barked furiously in a courtyard as they went by ; then the church clock struck two, and many domestic clocks followed or preceded it in piping tones. And just then Berthelini spied a light. It burned in a small house on the outskirts of the town, and thither the party now directed their steps.

‘It is always a chance,’ said Léon.

The house in question stood back from the street behind an open space, part garden, part turnip-field ; and several outhouses stood forward from either wing at right angles to the front. One of these had recently undergone some change. An enormous window, looking towards the north, had been effected in the wall and roof, and Léon began to hope it was a studio.

‘If it’s only a painter,’ he said, with a chuckle, ‘ten to one we get as good a welcome as we want.’

‘I thought painters were principally poor,’ said Stubbs.

‘Ah!’ cried Léon, ‘you do not know the world as I do. The poorer the better for us!’

And the trio advanced into the turnip-field.

The light was in the ground floor; as one window was brightly illuminated and two others more faintly, it might be supposed that there was a single lamp in one corner of a large apartment; and a certain tremulousness and temporary dwindling showed that a live fire contributed to the effect. The sound of a voice now became audible; and the trespassers paused to listen. It was pitched in a high, angry key, but had still a good, full, and masculine note in it. The utterance was voluble, too voluble even to be quite distinct; a stream of words, rising and falling, with ever and again a phrase thrown out by itself, as if the speaker reckoned on its virtue.

Suddenly another voice joined in. This time it was a woman’s; and if the man were angry, the woman was incensed to the degree of fury. There was that absolutely blank composure known to suffering males; that colourless unnatural speech which shows a spirit accurately balanced between homicide and hysterics; the tone in which the best

of women sometimes utter words worse than death to those most dear to them. If Abstract Bones-and-Sepulchre were to be endowed with the gift of speech, thus, and not otherwise, would it discourse. Léon was a brave man, and I fear he was somewhat sceptically given (he had been educated in a Papistical country), but the habit of childhood prevailed, and he crossed himself devoutly. He had met several women in his career. It was obvious that his instinct had not deceived him, for the male voice broke forth instantly in a towering passion.

The undergraduate, who had not understood the significance of the woman's contribution, pricked up his ears at the change upon the man.

'There's going to be a free fight,' he opined.

There was another retort from the woman, still calm but a little higher.

'Hysterics?' asked Léon of his wife. 'Is that the stage direction?'

'How should I know?' returned Elvira, somewhat tartly.

'Oh, woman, woman!' said Léon, beginning to open the guitar-case. 'It is one of the burdens of my life, Monsieur Stubbs; they support each other; they always pretend there is no system; they say

it's nature. Even Madame Berthelini, who is a dramatic artist !'

'You are heartless, Léon,' said Elvira ; 'that woman is in trouble.'

'And the man, my angel ?' inquired Berthelini, passing the ribbon of his guitar. 'And the man, *m'amour* ?'

'He is a man,' she answered.

'You hear that ?' said Léon to Stubbs. 'It is not too late for you. Mark the intonation. And now,' he continued, 'what are we to give them ?'

'Are you going to sing ?' asked Stubbs.

'I am a troubadour,' replied Léon. 'I claim a welcome by and for my art. If I were a banker could I do as much ?'

'Well, you wouldn't need, you know,' answered the undergraduate.

'Egad,' said Léon, 'but that's true. Elvira, that is true.'

'Of course it is,' she replied. 'Did you not know it ?'

'My dear,' answered Léon, impressively, 'I know nothing but what is agreeable. Even my knowledge of life is a work of art superiorly composed. But what are we to give them ? It should be something appropriate.'

Visions of 'Let dogs delight' passed through the undergraduate's mind; but it occurred to him that the poetry was English and that he did not know the air. Hence he contributed no suggestion.

'Something about our houselessness,' said Elvira.

'I have it,' cried Léon. And he broke forth into a song of Pierre Dupont's:—

Savez-vous où gîte
Mai, ce joli mois ?

Elvira joined in; so did Stubbs, with a good ear and voice, but an imperfect acquaintance with the music. Léon and the guitar were equal to the situation. The actor dispensed his throat-notes with prodigality and enthusiasm; and, as he looked up to heaven in his heroic way, tossing the black ringlets, it seemed to him that the very stars contributed a dumb applause to his efforts, and the universe lent him its silence for a chorus. That is one of the best features of the heavenly bodies, that they belong to everybody in particular; and a man like Léon, a chronic Endymion who managed to get along without encouragement, is always the world's centre for himself.

He alone—and it is to be noted, he was the worst singer of the three—took the music seriously

to heart, and judged the serenade from a high artistic point of view. Elvira, on the other hand, was preoccupied about their reception; and, as for Stubbs, he considered the whole affair in the light of a broad joke.

‘Know you the lair of May, the lovely month?’ went the three voices in the turnip-field.

The inhabitants were plainly fluttered; the light moved to and fro, strengthening in one window, paling in another; and then the door was thrown open, and a man in a blouse appeared on the threshold carrying a lamp. He was a powerful young fellow, with bewildered hair and beard, wearing his neck open; his blouse was stained with oil-colours in a harlequinesque disorder; and there was something rural in the droop and bagginess of his belted trousers.

From immediately behind him, and indeed over his shoulder, a woman’s face looked out into the darkness; it was pale and a little weary, although still young; it wore a dwindling, disappearing prettiness, soon to be quite gone, and the expression was both gentle and sour, and reminded one faintly of the taste of certain drugs. For all that, it was not a face to dislike; when the prettiness had vanished, it seemed as if a certain pale beauty might

step in to take its place ; and as both the mildness and the asperity were characters of youth, it might be hoped that, with years, both would merge into a constant, brave, and not unkindly temper.

‘What is all this?’ cried the man.

CHAPTER VI.

LÉON had his hat in his hand at once. He came forward with his customary grace ; it was a moment which would have earned him a round of cheering on the stage. Elvira and Stubbs advanced behind him, like a couple of Admetus's sheep following the god Apollo.

‘Sir,’ said Léon, ‘the hour is unpardonably late, and our little serenade has the air of an impertinence. Believe me, sir, it is an appeal. Monsieur is an artist, I perceive. We are here three artists benighted and without shelter, one a woman—a delicate woman—in evening dress—in an interesting situation. This will not fail to touch the woman’s heart of Madame, whom I perceive indistinctly behind Monsieur her husband, and whose face speaks eloquently of a well-regulated mind. Ah ! Monsieur, Madame—one generous movement, and you make three people happy ! Two or three hours beside your fire—I ask it of Monsieur in the name of Art—I ask it of Madame by the sanctity of womanhood.

The two, as by a tacit consent, drew back from the door.

‘Come in,’ said the man.

‘Entrez, Madame,’ said the woman.

The door opened directly upon the kitchen of the house, which was to all appearance the only sitting-room. The furniture was both plain and scanty; but there were one or two landscapes on the wall handsomely framed, as if they had already visited the committee-rooms of an exhibition and been thence extruded. Léon walked up to the pictures and represented the part of a connoisseur before each in turn, with his usual dramatic insight and force. The master of the house, as if irresistibly attracted, followed him from canvas to canvas with the lamp. Elvira was led directly to the fire, where she proceeded to warm herself, while Stubbs stood in the middle of the floor and followed the proceedings of Léon with mild astonishment in his eyes.

‘You should see them by daylight,’ said the artist.

‘I promise myself that pleasure,’ said Léon. ‘You possess, sir, if you will permit me an observation, the art of composition to a T.’

‘You are very good,’ returned the other. ‘But should you not draw nearer to the fire?’

‘With all my heart,’ said Léon.

And the whole party was soon gathered at the table over a hasty and not an elegant cold supper, washed down with the least of small wines. Nobody liked the meal, but nobody complained; they put a good face upon it, one and all, and made a great clattering of knives and forks. To see Léon eating a single cold sausage was to see a triumph; by the time he had done he had got through as much pantomime as would have sufficed for a baron of beef, and he had the relaxed expression of the over-eaten.

As Elvira had naturally taken a place by the side of Léon, and Stubbs as naturally, although I believe unconsciously, by the side of Elvira, the host and hostess were left together. Yet it was to be noted that they never addressed a word to each other, nor so much as suffered their eyes to meet. The interrupted skirmish still survived in ill-feeling; and the instant the guests departed it would break forth again as bitterly as ever. The talk wandered from this to that subject—for with one accord the party had declared it was too late to go to bed; but those two never relaxed towards each other; Goneril and

Regan in a sisterly tiff were not more bent on enmity.

It chanced that Elvira was so much tired by all the little excitements of the night, that for once she laid aside her company manners, which were both easy and correct, and in the most natural manner in the world leaned her head on Léon's shoulder. At the same time, fatigue suggesting tenderness, she locked the fingers of her right hand into those of her husband's left; and, half-closing her eyes, dozed off into a golden borderland between sleep and waking. But all the time she was not aware of what was passing, and saw the painter's wife studying her with looks between contempt and envy.

It occurred to Léon that his constitution demanded the use of some tobacco; and he undid his fingers from Elvira's in order to roll a cigarette. It was gently done, and he took care that his indulgence should in no other way disturb his wife's position. But it seemed to catch the eye of the painter's wife with a special significancy. She looked straight before her for an instant, and then, with a swift and stealthy movement, took hold of her husband's hand below the table. Alas! she might have spared herself the dexterity. For the poor fellow was so overcome by this caress that he stopped with

his mouth open in the middle of a word, and by the expression of his face plainly declared to all the company that his thoughts had been diverted into softer channels.

If it had not been rather amiable, it would have been absurdly droll. His wife at once withdrew her touch; but it was plain she had to exert some force. Thereupon the young man coloured and looked for a moment beautiful.

Léon and Elvira both observed the by-play, and a shock passed from one to the other; for they were inveterate match-makers, especially between those who were already married.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Léon, suddenly. ‘I see no use in pretending. Before we came in here we heard sounds indicating—if I may so express myself—an imperfect harmony.’

‘Sir——’ began the man.

But the woman was beforehand.

‘It is quite true,’ she said. ‘I see no cause to be ashamed. If my husband is mad I shall at least do my utmost to prevent the consequences. Picture to yourself, Monsieur and Madame,’ she went on, for she passed Stubbs over, ‘that this wretched person—a dauber, an incompetent, not fit to be a sign-painter—receives this morning an admirable offer from an

uncle—an uncle of my own, my mother's brother, and tenderly beloved—of a clerkship with nearly a hundred and fifty pounds a year, and that he—picture to yourself!—he refuses it! Why? For the sake of Art, he says. Look at his art, I say—look at it! Is it fit to be seen? Ask him—is it fit to be sold? And it is for this, Monsieur and Madame, that he condemns me to the most deplorable existence, without luxuries, without comforts, in a vile suburb of a country town. O non!’ she cried, ‘non—je ne me tairai pas—c’est plus fort que moi! I take these gentlemen and this lady for judges—is this kind? is it decent? is it manly? Do I not deserve better at his hands after having married him and’—(a visible hitch)—‘done everything in the world to please him.’

I doubt if there were ever a more embarrassed company at a table; everyone looked like a fool; and the husband like the biggest.

‘The art of Monsieur, however,’ said Elvira, breaking the silence, ‘is not wanting in distinction.’

‘It has this distinction,’ said the wife, ‘that nobody will buy it.’

‘I should have supposed a clerkship——’ began Stubbs.

‘Art is Art,’ swept in Léon. ‘I salute Art. It

is the beautiful, the divine; it is the spirit of the world, and the pride of life. But——' And the actor paused.

'A clerkship——' began Stubbs.

'I'll tell you what it is,' said the painter. 'I am an artist, and as this gentleman says, Art is this and the other; but of course, if my wife is going to make my life a piece of perdition all day long, I prefer to go and drown myself out of hand.'

'Go!' said his wife. 'I should like to see you!'

'I was going to say,' resumed Stubbs, 'that a fellow may be a clerk and paint almost as much as he likes. I know a fellow in a bank who makes capital water-colour sketches; he even sold one for seven-and-six.'

To both the women this seemed a plank of safety; each hopefully interrogated the countenance of her lord; even Elvira, an artist herself!—but indeed there must be something permanently mercantile in the female nature. The two men exchanged a glance; it was tragic; not otherwise might two philosophers salute, as at the end of a laborious life each recognised that he was still a mystery to his disciples.

Léon arose.

'Art is Art,' he repeated, sadly. 'It is not water-

colour sketches, nor practising on a piano. It is a life to be lived.'

'And in the meantime people starve!' observed the woman of the house. 'If that's a life, it is not one for me.'

'I'll tell you what,' burst forth Léon; 'you, Madame, go into another room and talk it over with my wife; and I'll stay here and talk it over with your husband. It may come to nothing, but let's try.'

'I am very willing,' replied the young woman; and she proceeded to light a candle. 'This way if you please.' And she led Elvira upstairs into a bedroom. 'The fact is,' said she, sitting down, 'that my husband cannot paint.'

'No more can mine act,' replied Elvira.

'I should have thought he could,' returned the other; 'he seems clever.'

'He is so, and the best of men besides,' said Elvira; 'but he cannot act.'

'At least he is not a sheer humbug like mine; he can at least sing.'

'You mistake Léon,' returned his wife, warmly. 'He does not even pretend to sing; he has too fine a taste; he does so for a living. And, believe me, neither of the men are humbugs. They are people with a mission—which they cannot carry out.'

‘Humbug or not,’ replied the other, ‘you came very near passing the night in the fields; and, for my part, I live in terror of starvation. I should think it was a man’s mission to think twice about his wife. But it appears not. Nothing is their mission but to play the fool. Oh!’ she broke out, ‘is it not something dreary to think of that man of mine? If he could only do it, who would care? But no—not he—no more than I can!’

‘Have you any children?’ asked Elvira.

‘No; but then I may.’

‘Children change so much,’ said Elvira, with a sigh.

And just then from the room below there flew up a sudden snapping chord on the guitar; one followed after another; then the voice of Léon joined in; and there was an air being played and sung that stopped the speech of the two women. The wife of the painter stood like a person transfixed; Elvira, looking into her eyes, could see all manner of beautiful memories and kind thoughts that were passing in and out of her soul with every note; it was a piece of her youth that went before her; a green French plain, the smell of apple-flowers, the far and shining ringlets of a river, and the words and presence of love.

‘Léon has hit the nail,’ thought Elvira to herself.
‘I wonder how.’

The how was plain enough. Léon had asked the painter if there were no air connected with courtship and pleasant times; and having learnt what he wished, and allowed an interval to pass, he had soared forth into

O mon amant,
O mon désir,
Sachons cueillir
L’heure charmante!

‘Pardon me, Madame,’ said the painter’s wife,
‘your husband sings admirably well.’

‘He sings that with some feeling,’ replied Elvira, critically, although she was a little moved herself, for the song cut both ways in the upper chamber; ‘but it is as an actor and not as a musician.’

‘Life is very sad,’ said the other; ‘it so wastes away under one’s fingers.’

‘I have not found it so,’ replied Elvira. ‘I think the good parts of it last and grow greater every day.’

‘Frankly, how would you advise me?’

‘Frankly, I would let my husband do what he wished. He is obviously a very loving painter; you have not yet tried him as a clerk. And you know—if it were only as the possible father of your children—it is as well to keep him at his best.’

‘He is an excellent fellow,’ said the wife.

They kept it up till sunrise with music and all manner of good fellowship ; and at sunrise, while the sky was still temperate and clear, they separated on the threshold with a thousand excellent wishes for each other’s welfare. Castel-le-Gâchis was beginning to send up its smoke against the golden East ; and the church bell was ringing six.

‘My guitar is a familiar spirit,’ said Léon, as he and Elvira took the nearest way towards the inn ; ‘it resuscitated a Commissary, created an English tourist, and reconciled a man and wife.’

Stubbs, on his part, went off into the morning with reflections of his own.

‘They are all mad,’ thought he, ‘all mad—but wonderfully decent.’

THE END.

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